

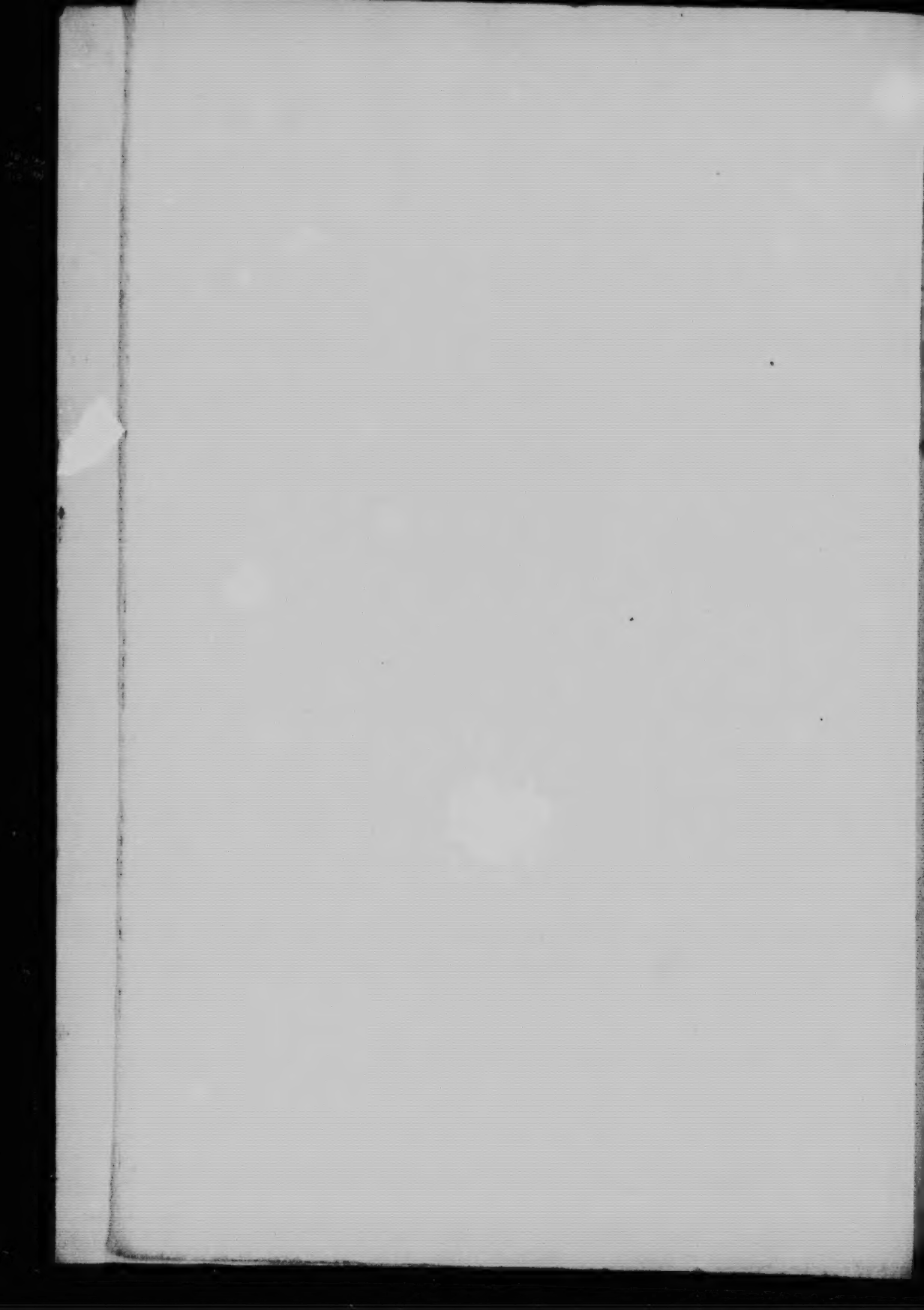
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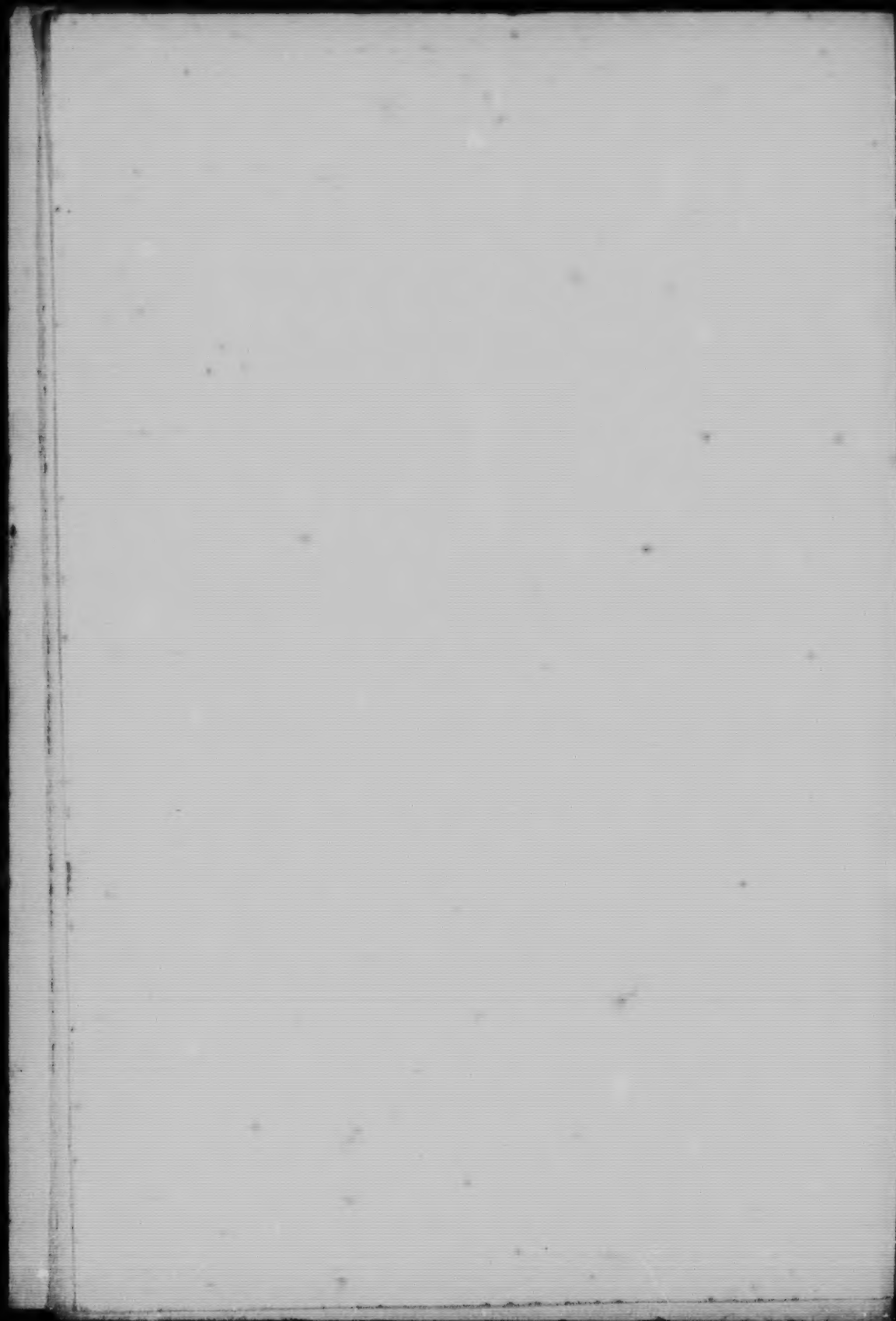


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FASCINATION



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Fascination

CHAPTER I

I HAVE heard it said, by those who ought to know, that the nose is the subtlest and most potent memory tickler that exists ; and, for my own part, I can certainly say that what brings my days in Burma with most startling promptness back to me are things like an unexpected whiff of sandal-wood perfume, or a lingering odour of coconut oil, or maybe a marshy exhalation that serves to recall the acrid smell of rich squishy paddy fields in the snipe season. Of course my ear plays its part, and a very important part, too, in the evoking of tropic remembrances. Anything resembling the scream of the scouting carrion kite always carries me back to my first cold weather in the East, just as surely as the suggestion of a certain vocal Tonk ! tonk ! tonk ! that I used of old to hear faintly through the jungle makes me for the moment feel the furnace heat of a dry zone April. But these pregnant sounds and smells are of no manner of use to me in attempting to bring my *milieu* home to you, or at any rate to those of you to whom *durian* and *ngapi* are mere dead inexpressive vocables. It is through the eye alone that I can hope in the least to appeal,

and so, roughly to prepare the ground, let me ask you to remember that the back of the scene on which the curtain is to go up is for the most part overlaid by hot sandstone, with aloes blue across its yellow face, a yellow that quivers and dances with haze under a relentless sun. Here and there blazes a red brick pagoda, more or less in ruins, and in the hollows and down by the deep cut nullahs the big leaved castor oil plant—its foliage all a blend of chocolate and purple and green—flourishes round the straight limbed toddy palms. There is a good deal of thorny scrub, you will observe, in the distance, and something to take you into the depth of the picture in the shape of gaunt alien telegraph lines that border a sandy cart track and provide a taking off ground for coal black king crows and flashing green flycatchers. Here and there over the country lie squares of what they call *Ya* cultivation, millet and sesamum and cotton, but the yellow sandstone gives the note for everything close at hand. The scrub grows greyer as the eye travels to the horizon, where from the rolling plain, dotted with drab bamboo hamlets, rises the mighty volcanic cone of Mindaung, that can no more be left out of the scene than can Fujiyama out of the typical landscape of Japan. I would have you take special note of that cone. We think a mighty lot of our majestic Mindaung in Central Burma. We have legends about its *Nats*, or guardian spirits, whose golden heads went astray what time the British occupied the country. We talk of the good old days when elephants browsed on its slopes and of the eventful months after the Annexation when Bo Cho and his merry men kept the police on the scamper

round its wrinkled base. The elephants have gone and Bo Cho's generation is no more. His tattered mantle has fallen on a picturesque but graceless crew of vagrants, sprung from Heaven knows where, out, not for glory but for sordid cash, who prefer pulling the bangles off shrill dowagers in the lee of a blazing stable to sniping sepoys like gentlemen from behind a cactus clump. But Mindaung still towers, a landmark for twenty townships, and its peak, above the green plantain groves, is still a place of refuge and refreshment in the hot weather, when all the plain is burnt and cracked and gasping, and the big river flows, in a shrunk channel, past Mahananda and Sedaw and Padu and the rest of them, separated from their high-water monsoon landing stages by wide stretches of blinding white sand.

The beginning of what I have set myself to record, so far as it can be said to have had a definite beginning, came to me, as by rights it should, from across a groundwork of sandstones and aloes and castor oil plant. I recollect that on this particular occasion there was an extra number of red pagodas as well as some corrugated iron roofs in the setting, for at the moment when the action begins, on a warm Sunday afternoon in December or January, you must picture me in the subdivisional officer's quarters at Padu, mightily lightly clad, with my back to Mindaung, gazing from my long arm-chair down the hot hillside over the purple of the *Kanako* shrubs towards the steamer ghat and the river beyond. It was in this easy posture that I became aware of some eight or ten Europeans leaving the shade of

the palms by the river's bank and setting their faces resolutely towards the slope that led upwards to the court house. They emerged opposite the point at which the Irrawaddy Flotilla mail steamer had just anchored and where it was simmering noisily behind the pipals and tamarinds, and I wondered drowsily what had brought them out at this place and hour, for the weather was fiery for the time of year and the tourists' usual goal was Mahananda, the ancient capital, with its historic ruins, five miles down stream. A globe trotter at Padu was almost an event. I could tell these were globe trotters. Their pagris, their attitude of jaded circumspection, the very way in which they strove to walk abreast of their white jacketed Burman attendants, all betrayed them. I could almost make out their cameras. I watched them disappear behind a line of raised wall in the direction of the jail, and took it that they had come to snatch a few perspiring moments of sight-seeing while the vessel waited to take in wood and put out cargo. I do not know that I gave them a second thought for several minutes; then it suddenly struck me that they might perhaps be going to venture on the unheard-of and stump the whole five miles into Mahananda through the grilling afternoon; and, just as the amazing notion came to tickle me, it was dispelled by the unaccustomed sound of boots—Christian boots on brick-work, where bare heathen soles were the rule—and a British bass. I heard my name called from below. I sat up in my chair. I rose to my feet, and, peering, was confounded by the sight of a carpet of white umbrellas with figures

moving beneath them. The small compound, perched on an old brick pagoda platform, seemed suddenly full of people. A man with a grey moustache and baggy eyes straddled knickerbockered legs at the foot of the stairs ; I noticed three ladies with blue veils and spectacles to match, also a girl in unmistakable Bond Street khaki. I looked for the one in this alarming group who could have shouted my name, and there, with an air of shepherding and authority over these alien forms was a familiar figure ! Hanbury ! at least, by the Gazette postings I knew it must be Hanbury, vice Cripps, transferred, although he had shaved off the moustache that had been the pride of Henzada, and wore, in token of having just returned from Europe, a heavy green tweed suit.

For a moment my gaze travelled helplessly over the group ; then, as the venetian by my hand clapped back unexpectedly, the umbrellas seemed to drop and every eye turned up to me.

I should like to place on record that, if lightly, I was at least adequately clad and that the verandah hid the bulk of my deficiencies : still, it was immensely unfair of Hanbury. His leave had blunted his sense of perspective. A week later wild horses would not have dragged him thus, with spectacted females in his train, to a particularly retiring bachelor's quarters of a Sunday afternoon. I jumped back as though the umbrellas had been levelled revolvers, took three irresolute steps, and sat down in my bedroom. I began putting on my socks and wondering, with an eye to developments below, whether I could run to sodas for the whole

party. As luck would have it, there was plenty of ice, or would be, immediately the waterman was back from the steamer. Things were happening downstairs. I heard the durwan waking my Burman *lugale* in the back regions. A moment later I caught the sound of slow footsteps ascending the stairs. There was a pause, a chair squeaked on its castors in the verandah. I smelt a cigarette, and presently the striped purdah over my bedroom door ran a foot or so on its rings and the entering light was darkened by a wavering figure.

"You beggar!" I whispered hoarsely. "You unconscionable fiend!"

He crossed the threshold, treading circumspectly, with the mien of a conspirator. "Upon my soul, I'm beastly sorry, Chepstowe!" he mouthed, with eyebrows raised. He appeared to be taking the situation and all his enormity in. The sight of my Shan trousers brought everything back to him with a rush, and his next words were "Nobody saw you, you know."

"You beggar!" I murmured again.

He was most anxious to conciliate me. He would not be content till he had shaken hands with me in a moist ceremonial way that showed how fresh he was from England. "Don't bother to dress," he adjured me. "All I wanted to know was whether there was anyone stopping at the rest house."

"What? the rest house here?" I said. "There was a Geological Survey chap there yesterday. He had breakfast with me. I think he's gone, though. His carts left this morning. Who wants to go to the rest house? Whoever's your crowd below?"

"Just come down with them on the mail boat from Mandalay," said Hanbury, mechanically taking the glass my *lugale* was holding near his elbow. "Oh, rum ones, I tell you! I couldn't get rid of them; had to be civil and show them round. They would come up here to see the view, though I told them what you were like. Thanks, just a weak one, please. The one in knickerbockers is a Radical M.P. They say he came out anti-opium but was converted at the Ruby Mines. Spats! Lads you see, by any chance? Spats! He says they keep the dust out!"

"Has he got a cook?" I asked. "There's only a durwan at the rest house here. Why don't you make him go on to Mahananda? There's a khansamah and cooking pots there. Everything you want."

"Oh, it's not for him," he explained. "He's bound for Mahananda all right. Nothing off the beaten track for him. No, it's for another lot." He held out a finger at me. "Tell me," he said. "I've never served in the dry zone before. Have you ever heard of Chins on Mindaung?"

"There used to be some tribes there," I said. "But that was centuries ago."

"More than I knew!" he cried. "Yes, it's for an ethnographical cuss who wants to study them—the Chins, I mean—on the spot; measure them; dig up their graves—barrows and things. Lively, isn't it? Eh?"

"They find Chin beads there still," I returned. "Agate and cornelian. I got some the other day."

"Agate, that's the stuff!" he exclaimed.

"He's not so far wrong then after all, the old boy. Knows what he's talking about. Yes, he wants to make Padu his base and work the job from here. It's all right about the rest house, then, is it?"

"Quite, so far as I know," I said. "In any case, even if the geological man is still there, there will be room for your friend as well."

"Ah!" he observed. He emitted it dubiously, pulling at his upper lip. "You see—he has got female belongings with him," he explained. "Two of em."

"Two!" I echoed, with a note of anguish that made him grin.

"Wife and daughter, I gather," he went on. "Mrs.—what is their beastly name, now? I shall be forgetting my own next! They call him the Professor on board, though he's not really as bad as that. A nice old chap. Begins with a 'c,' I know."

He stared at me as though I could help him. I looked him up and down, watching him twitch odd portions of his garments away from his perspiring form, and was impelled to probe the young man. "Did you put them up to making this their base?" I asked.

He ran his finger round the inside of his stiff collar. "How were they to know?" he demanded, a little defiantly. "I don't know the District, but Padu is nearer Mindaung than Mahananda is, and they tell me you can get carts more easily here." He looked hard at me, as hard as I was looking at him, but failed to carry it off by anathematizing the elements. He puffed testily. "Curse this heat!"

he cried. "One might just as well pour one's peg straight into one's shirt. No thanks, not another. Don't tempt me! It's no use. Lord! to think that three weeks ago I was wearing. . . ." He sat down upon a uniform case and fanned himself with his topi.

"I hear you're going on leave yourself shortly," he said presently.

"Yes, a month's privilege," I returned. "Only to India." By this time I had managed to fasten a necktie of some kind. "Well, now, how about your people outside?" I said, slipping on my jacket. "What will they have?"

"Oh, don't talk about them!" he implored me. "They've walked on. I can say good-bye to them later when I go to get my kit off the boat. They won't start for another hour. Take your coat off again, Chepstowe. You make me hot to see you with it on. To think that . . . yes—less than three weeks ago . . ."

I discarded my jacket and my tie. "Why didn't you say they had gone on earlier?" I asked. "You might have saved me putting on all these clothes."

To which he retorted, holding out his arms as though to let the moisture drip from them, "Look at mine!"

"Have you had a good time at home?" I asked.

"Quite fair," he told me. "Seven weeks and a day. I was skating a month ago. Snow on the ground. What price snow now, eh?"

"I suppose you know you've overstayed your leave," I said. "Cripps left three days ago. I had nearly given you up."

"Oh, I've squared them in Rangoon all right," he retorted airily. "By the way, talking of babus, your head clerk was on the mail boat. He has just finished his leave too, I gather."

"Ah, Maung Myit," I said. "Yes. I had very nearly given him up as well as you."

"Useful chap, that," said Hanbury. "Wants to be made a Myook. So they all do, though, don't they? Yes, I think I shall like this place. Tell me, has Cripps left any furniture? I want a camp bed and a saddle badly."

"He didn't tell me," I said. "However, what he's left will be all there in his bungalow, your bungalow now. I can always lend you a bed. Come and have dinner to-night."

"Thanks," he replied. "I'll leave it open if I may. The Professor said something about giving me dinner at the rest house. They've got a cook. Well, I must hunt my crew up and see they don't miss the boat. See you later, I expect."

And he left, much as he had come, circumspectly, more or less on tiptoe. One would have imagined that he was half afraid of encountering the converted M.P. on the staircase.

CHAPTER II

ABSOLVED from clerical cares, Maung Myit had been gaining merit as well as flesh during his absence on leave. A month was what he had applied for in the first instance. The demise of the predestined parent had been the occasion for the inevitable fortnight's extension without pay. Then had ensued the holidays, a convenient carry-over to the Saturday, and, at the end of them, on Monday morning, behold a transfigured Maung Myit, half on and half off my visitors' mat, quick-breathing from his early morning climb to my bungalow, but with the usual votive plantains, and (what was most unusual) with a poll closely shorn. This beautiful baldness was a surprise. He might have been a prosperous looking jail-bird or a well-nourished police recruit in mufti. His third fruitless attempt to make his silk head-cloth cling to the slippery surface led me to ask him searching things about the sacrifice of his hair, and I learnt that, although married and a happy father, he had chosen to spend his six weeks' holiday, sanctimoniously tonsured, clad in a mustard yellow robe, in a monastery near his home in Lower Burma. It was beyond me why he should have taken the trouble to kill off a devoted mother for so harmless, nay, estimable an object, but I did not ask him why,

for I knew I should never be able to burrow down to his ultimate motives, and anyway, there he was, and I able to congratulate him on the outcome of his religious exercises. Prayer and meditation had undoubtedly agreed with the beggar. He had been a little fine-drawn towards the end of the football season, but now he bulged under his white cotton jacket. His contours abounded as of one drawing three hundred a month rather than his modest sixty, and it seemed quite in the order of things that I should presently find him inviting my attention to that little matter of his nomination to the Subordinate Civil Service.

I had already more than once heard the distressing story he now poured out as he sat and unravelled the cane strands of the mat that projected from below him. Twice, as I knew, he had officiated as Myook ; twice he had reverted to his substantive appointment as head clerk of my office. This, that, and the other fortunate junior, closer to the fountain head of honour than himself, had been confirmed ; Maung Myaing, Maung Kyaing—he rattled off their names, present appointments and salaries like a vocal Civil List. Where was he ? His chances were blocked by a regiment of men above him. There was not so much as an excise inspectorship to look forward to. It was deplorable. Yet, black as it all looked, there was still a gleam of hope. With the help of one who was both his father and mother (I suppose I took the place of the lady butchered to make a Burman holiday) his protector and his friend—with my assistance, in short, he still might leap over this

wall of seniors. After all, when it came to a question of claims—his own and his ancestors'—it occurred to him that he might, to begin with, bring again to my notice the services of that fine old Extra Assistant Commissioner, his grandfather, Maung Kyin Ya, A.T.M., who—

I stopped him at that point of his ancestor's career where, for the capture of a dacoit leader in the late seventies, that spirited veteran received a revolver and certificate from a grateful Chief Commissioner. As a matter of fact, I had already suggested to headquarters that my young man should get one of the vacancies at Padu that would be caused by my departure on leave, but I was not going to tell him this till the matter was settled. I refrained from making any suggestions regarding his mother's demise, but I was constrained to put it to him why, if he was so anxious to become a Myook, he had not spent his leave in reading up for the Subordinate Civil Service examination instead of vegetating in monastic idleness. He unravelled the cane harder than ever, but dismissed the suggestion without comment, giving me clearly to understand that there was more mockery than sacrilege in talking about a deviation from the Path when, after all, a word from myself in the Deputy Commissioner's ear on his behalf was worth a good year's study. Nor did I press the matter, for it occurred to me, that, when all was said and done, his Myookship was not really what he had come to see me about. I looked again at the plantains he had brought. They were just ordinary *pigyans*, not the more succulent kind that a really urgent suitor

would have produced to back his prayer with. He was probably just paying a routine call to mark his return from leave, and I thought he might go.

I asked him when he had arrived and he told me the afternoon before. "Then you came in the boat with Mr. Hanbury," I said, and he assented. Yes, he had had speech of Hanbury *thakin*. I enquired if he had seen the other European ladies and gentlemen on board, and then, in a moment, he dropped his hands and his suppliant's role together and grew bright. The main object of his early morning visit was clear. The excellent youth was bursting with news about the illustrious travellers I had had a glimpse of the day before, and wanted me to share his riches. I spoke to him in English and he replied, after the manner of his kind, in Burmese, but it was mere etiquette that kept him to his own vernacular. In fact, he led off with a description of how his linguistic attainments had, the day before, earned him the honour of a summons to the first-class saloon to act as intermediary between the tourists and certain lacquer work sellers—rude, unlettered market women who knew no tongue but their own. He hinted at limitless condescensions on the part of the travellers; gave an airy pointedness to a hand-shake that the Member of Parliament had conferred on him at parting, and showed me a testimonial from the same exalted source that spoke of the bearer's address and proficiency. That was the crown of all! It was on Government House paper. I noticed that it was already black with the thumbs of half the village, and felt like a stray Protestant in presence

of a relic. He talked of snap-shot photographs. He was going to have a picture sent him when certain films had been developed in Rangoon.

Curiously enough, he knew nothing of any of the party's having got off at Padu. He had noticed no ladies on shore after the boat had left again, no acquaintances of Mr. Hanbury's. It was a fact that there were strangers at the rest house. He had observed laden carts climbing the slope the afternoon before. There might be ladies stopping there. He had noticed a strange Madrasi ayah at the bazaar that very morning, but had not connected her with any of yesterday's traveller. Immediately a relation was suggested, the ayah took on a new significance and he straightened himself on the mat and began sorting his reminiscences of the day before. There had been two ladies on board who, in the light of present facts, might be Hanbury *thakin's* friends. Of them he could at first tell me nothing, or at any rate not as much as he could about the ayah, who had apparently been a personable female, but he had a good deal to say about the old gentleman whose companion the ladies seemed to be. He likened him to a late Commissioner of Arakan, Grattan, Puffy Grattan, C.I.E., whose memory he held in high esteem. He spoke of the stranger as stout—"wa wa gyi,"—he joined his fingertips and agitated his curved palms at a distance from his body as indicating lavish girth; he hinted at spectacles, seemed to suggest long hair; in a word outlined a Continental ethnologist of the driest. He flowered with detail as though the gentleman's identity had been a matter of vital concern to me.

He could not have been more minute if I had commissioned him to investigate and report on the visitors. His description of the ladies was not so happy, and it came over me after a while that I had no business to be allowing him to talk like this, so I put an end to his efforts and let him go, and admitted the Veterinary Assistant, who, with his wife and daughters, freshly powdered and sandalwood scented, had been squatting in their silks in the verandah during Maung Myit's interview. There was a better class of plantain this time.

All this while there had been no sound or sign of Hanbury. He had not responded to my offers of meals. I did not get sight of him again till I reached office later that day. He came in while I was hearing petitions, refused a chair and sat on my table, just where the punkah frill was able to ruffle and re-smooth his hair with alternate swings. "They never gave me your note till breakfast time this morning," he informed me. "Don't say you waited dinner for me! I was dining at the rest house with those people I travelled down with yesterday. Mostly my cooking pots and things, yes; but they've got a cook and some sort of camp kit and are shaking down finely. Awfully good of you, but they wouldn't have bothered you for worlds, see? Then after chota haziri this morning it was round the bazaar with them till breakfast time. Lord, I'm about fed up with lacquer work! That old bazaar durwan is a buck stick, upon my soul!"

He seemed a little "fed up" not only with lacquer but with the people at the rest house and

shook the last ashes off his host's cigarette, just as he might have shaken off from his feet the dust of the rest house verandah. He lit a cheroot, borrowing a light for the purpose from one of my morning petitioners, the late slaughter house licensee's widow, a round lady in pink check with jade bangles, who amiably proffered her match box from her seat on the floor near the revolving book-case and allowed it to be pocketed without a word. Sitting there in his khaki uniform, chewing his weed into position, he was more like the Hanbury I had known in Wakema than the tourist leader of yesterday. I saw now that he had been wise to discard his moustache. I remembered it in its last phase as just a prickly red fringe that made him sneer. His face looked swept and garnished without it. It was a healthy face, scarlet with the promise of a Burma bronze, saved from a thin-lipped grimness by the invincible optimism of a cheerfully tilted nose. Apart from his upper lip, he was the same lean, telescopic thing as ever, projecting in undress from his collar and sleeves and Jhodpur breeches as they often do who depend for a full sartorial effect upon a liberal display of sock and cuff linen. He steered clear of the visitors for the most part, after giving vent to the remarks recorded above, preferring to know all about Cripps's camp bed and to find out how the saddlery he was taking over had got so dirty.

I can call to mind only one or two further references to the people at the rest house—even now he was not sure about their names—"Caterham, or something of that kind," he thought. . . . "Stopping on three or four days

. . . Yes, they will want carts then. . . . The old man will come round and see you. . . . They like those new armchairs in the rest house no end." . . .

But all this was mere interpolation on the text of the stout lady's petition and her own shrill commentary thereon, and I could take but little from him. Altogether he was a nuisance, and I was glad when an officious head constable called him away to sign books and I was able to give my undivided attention to my work.

It was a matter of deep regret to me that I was not able to comply with the slaughter house lady's prayer that her licence might be extended. I told her she might appeal to the Deputy Commissioner. I even found out for her what the stamp duty on the appeal would be, but she was not at all appeased. I could see by the way she gathered up her plum coloured sandals that she had reckoned much on the gift of the match box to Hanbury. I know she felt like asking for it back.

And then, before her voice, raised a little in injured protest, had died away down the verandah, the peon was at it again and the gentleman from the rest house was announced.

CHAPTER III

I GAZED at the figure that ducked deliberately under the purdah into my office in the wake of a white pasteboard whereon ran in upright type the legend "Mr. Matthew Cavi-sham," and, as I gazed, my estimate of Maung Myit's descriptive powers fell grievously. The young man had left me with an impression of Hanbury's male fellow traveller that was scrubby and Teutonic. I had half expected a hirsute savant to waddle in; some party in the same pot-bellied style, at any rate, as old Grattan (late of Arakan) who had served as an image earlier that morning, and, behold, here was a sprawling grey-haired gentleman with sloping shoulders and nothing but the vaguest protuberance below his dangling glasses to warrant my head clerk's pantomime of outline. The apparition was so different from my prepared imaginings, that, despite his pagried Panama and his gold sleeve-links, I thought for one mistrustful moment that it was not Hanbury's man at all, and that I had been captured by some oil prospector unawares.

His first words, however, placed him for me. "A Mr. Hanbury—" he began, sonorously, and fumbled for his glasses, clearing his throat

I was grateful that he had not begun "My friend, Sir Gerald—" Most of the globe trotters who came to see me at Mahananda were wont to lead off by flourishing a Member of Council in my face and daring me to be unaccommodating.

"I think you travelled down with him yesterday, didn't you?" I said.

"On the Flotilla boat," he assented. "He mentioned your name in connection with the matter of carts that I should like to hire for a trip into the interior."

"Ah, to go to Mindaung?" said I.

"Mindaung," said he. "That is the name, I'm told. Magnificent hill, isn't it? How it stands out! I understand that orders to the headman must pass through you."

"How many carts do you want?" I asked.

He pulled at his drooping moustache and studied a slip of paper. "There are three of us, and we have a small tent," he murmured. "Now, I should like your opinion. We could, of course, do with five, but Mr. Hanbury seemed to think that would be cutting it down rather fine. Are carts difficult to get here?"

"I managed to raise two hundred and seventy for the Viceroy last year," I said.

He was not as impressed with this triumph of organization as I had hoped he would be, but he gave a puff of reassurance. "Shall we say six, then?" said he.

"Six, by all means," I replied. "Seven, if you like."

"Six will be ample, thanks," he said.

"When do you want them?" I asked.

He again fell back upon his paper. "The ladies are very much taken with this charming place, you know," he remarked at last, rubbing his chin. "But I think I shall be able to tear them away by Thursday."

"I'd better make out a general order," I said. "That will ensure your getting carts not only from the headman here but from the *thugyis* of all the villages on your way to Mindaung. If you don't mind waiting a minute, I will get my head clerk to make it out for you."

He hastened to assure me that it was remarkably good of me.

"Call the head clerk," I said to the peon, and then I slewed round on my visitor again. "You've come to study the hill tribes?" I asked, and immediately he showed me eyes and mouth rounded in deprecatory protest.

"Please understand," he explained, "that I am the very humblest of amateurs. I merely dabble. I am not accredited to any scientific body. Yes, I want to study—see something of the people. Anthropometry has been my hobby for many years. In my early days I was a medical student. I came out with the idea that I might be able to do some measurements on my own account. I have all the Government's figures. Most illuminating I assure you. Take the Talaing, for instance. There's a cephalic index for you!" He puckered his eyes at me half reproachfully, as though he did not need to be told that I had been wasting all my priceless ethnological opportunities. "But after

all" he went on, "there are *lacunae* that even a dabbler might do something to fill. The Chins, you know, and others. How about their heads, their superciliary arches? Yes, the authorities were very kind to me in Rangoon and Mandalay; gave me every facility in the jails and elsewhere; most interesting! It was in Mandalay, by the way, that I heard of your extinct volcano, Mindaung. They tell me there are remains of old Chin settlements on its slopes. What physical impress have those tribes left behind them? Eh? Has any one ever enquired? Now, I put it to you, would you call the Burmans round about here a very pure type?"

"As pure as anywhere in Burma," I said.

"Precisely," he went on eagerly. "Just the very people of all others, I take it, who would readily show any trace whatsoever of a foreign admixture."

"Well—if you call the Chins foreign—" I began. I only knew of the Chins as an exceptionally smelly hill-tribe who, in the flesh, suggested nothing of the stainless blue of the distant uplands bearing their name which I could see through the office door, rising beyond the glare and shimmer of the Irrawaddy. "Surely they are akin to the Burmans," I went on.

"Akin, yes, in so far as they are Tibeto-Burmans —" he said, and stopped.

For some moments there had been a growing flutter of hushed encounter in the verandah outside my office; a feminine voice, just audible, rang with a note of subdued recognition. Through Mr. Cavisham's outpourings I could hear the light tap

of bootleather merged with the accustomed pad of menial feet, and had become aware, in a vague way, of a collective movement towards the door, of whispers of insistent invitation and the creak of a half-hearted advance. There was a suppressed "I think I'll wait," and immediately afterwards Maung Myit crossed the opening of the doorway, backing radiantly, and appearing, with his obsequious hands, to encourage a reluctant visitor into the Presence. A roving fancy, at the sight of his sliding retrogression, might have pictured him treading some old world measure. His flat face was wrinkled with the true smirk of the minuet. It quite fell into the figure that a slim young thing should—instead of waiting—follow him, moving, like a lured dove, across the open space of light, and halt in front of the shining background of hill and river. For a few seconds this new arrival, in hat and veil, darkened the doorway, and then, emboldened by the sight of my visitor's back, stepped forward and made for the shelter of his arm.

"Ah!" said Mr. Cavisham, with a side glance, and then, to me, "My wife," and, rising as I rose, "My dear, this is Mr.——"

I helped him out. "Chepstowe," I said. "With an 'e' at the end; o w e, not the other kind. How do you do, Mrs. Cavisham. One moment, I'll get you a chair."

"Papa," said the veiled one.

Mr. Cavisham allowed himself a second survey of the figure at his elbow. "Why, my dear, you've got her hat on," he exclaimed.

"Fancy your noticing that!" observed the young lady.

"My daughter," Mr. Cavisham corrected himself.

"My daughter, Mr.—, Mr.—"

"With an 'e' at the end." I murmured sombrely, and bowed again.

"I have no head for names," apologized my visitor.

"Except of hill tribes," his daughter assured me.

"You do remember them, papa. Padaungs, Padaungs, Padus—"

"Kadus, not Padus," said her father.

"There, you see," said Miss Cavisham, "I should never have known. I can't tell the difference between a Kaw and a Kwi."

"Tut, tut! Quite simple," said Mr. Cavisham.

As a rule my visitors sat on mats. I suddenly found my resources strained. Mr. Cavisham sank back into my only spare chair, mainly to avoid the punkah, which slapped him intermittently. I waved for another seat to be brought, and Maung Myit, who blinked, glowing, in the background, rustled off to fetch it from the bench. Miss Cavisham followed him out with her eyes.

"To think of our meeting that nice Burman here again!" she cried. "You remember him, papa. The man with the adorable heliotrope waistcloth who translated for us on board the boat yesterday, and who had been a magistrate."

But Maung Myit had no interest for Mr. Cavisham. He turned to his daughter. "Where has she gone Meg?" he demanded.

"Back to the rest house." replied Miss Cavisham

"She felt the sun, and so, as my topi was thicker than hers, we changed."

He nodded slowly. "Nothing the matter, I hope," he said.

"Nothing, nothing," she assured him.

He focused his offspring over the top of his glasses. "Alone?" he asked.

"We met Mr. Hanbury outside, and he offered to see her home," said the young lady.

"Ah!" he murmured, and wiped and adjusted his pince-nez reflectively. It was at this moment that Maung Myit returned, puffing, with the chair and that Miss Cavisham dropped her slim white self into it. Till then I had been standing with my body twisted to evade the bobbing punkah frill. I was glad to get into my chair again. We settled ourselves. Miss Cavisham nearly put her blue veil up, but desisted. Mr. Cavisham's finger tips resounded on my blotting pad. He nodded slowly to himself.

There was a pause, and then his eye fixed me again. "I may take it, then," he said "that Mindaung will afford a fair field for an ethnologist."

"Say 'yes,'" said a voice from behind the veil.

"Do you want to go to Mindaung?" I enquired, a little surprised at this interpolation.

"Frightfully," she said. "It's been train and steamer, steamer and train the whole time up till now. I haven't worn my habit once. I want to get off the beaten track."

I turned to Mr. Cavisham, with whom, after all, my business lay. "I am not an ethnologist," I said, "and can hardly say what is a fair field for one, but I'll guarantee you'll find the place interestir."

enough for most purposes, and anyway, there are the Chin burial places."

My young lady interrupted again, "Dacoits?" she enquired.

"I'm sure I hope not," I said.

"How dull!" she observed. "Tigers?"

"Leopards, perhaps," I replied. "And views. You can see nearly half of Upper Burma from the top."

She tossed her chin under her veil. "Views! You can get them from anywhere," she said.

I did not pursue the matter further with her. I may have been a little short with her. I turned to Mr. Cavisham. "You wanted six carts, I think," I said.

And on this we embarked on a discussion of the journey to the big hill. They really took up a great deal of my valuable time. I was just able to get rid of them by the time I was due on the bench. It was not till well on into the afternoon that I was able to review the situation and recall with amazement the fact that I had offered to lend them a pony for their trip. It was about the same time that I made the equally amazing discovery that I had not the remotest idea what the young lady's face was like.

CHAPTER IV

FATE, in the beneficent guise of Messrs. Thomas Cook & Son, had long ordained that there should be a white Assistant Commissioner stationed at Padu to keep a despotic archæological eye on the British visitors to the ruined capital. This accounts for me on the scene of action. How it came about that the policeman, who had no dealings with the tourists, was also a European, I do not pretend to say. I have heard it put down by some to the Public Works Department, who, in a year of exceptional balances, inadvertently blossomed out at Padu into police officers' quarters of a type that it would have been a wickedness to put a Burman inspector into. However that may be, there were the two of us there, Hanbury and myself, each very pleased to have the other, and I, for my part, so alive to my responsibilities that, unsociable as I was (and I was a very bear!) it was almost unheard of that an English visitor, if ever he did come to Padu, should be more than forty-eight hours in the place without my having made a point of seeing him.

Yet this is precisely what happened in Mrs. Cavisham's case.

Now that I come to think of it, it seems strange

that it should have been her of all people that I neglected. The moment I did call, and was brought face to face with the neglected divinity, enthroned in pink and cream draperies among the uncouth appointments of the Padu rest house, the enormity of my shortcomings rose and overwhelmed me. She was of that smooth insistent tribe that can demand as a right to be set in soft places ; to be harboured and fussed over and cherished ; to be given of the finest in the land. I could see that it was not so much my delay in paying my respects that was the outrage, as the idea that my meek pretexts of overwork and a touch of fever (oh, yes, when the time came I piled it on!) could be seriously spoken of as an extenuation or excuse. She was gracious, mind you, ever so gracious, and made it clear that my offer of dinner on the day of their arrival was to be accounted to me for righteousness, but she managed, in her own ineffable way, to rub things in nevertheless.

I think I was duly abject. I explained about the rest house mosquito nets ; I made the best of the crack in the spout of the brown rest house teapot ; I emitted a wan joke or two about the fearsome jail-made dhurries that flaunted their stripes at one from the dusty boards ; in fact, I should have worked, in an agony of depreciation, through the whole of the rest house effects if Hanbury had not, to relieve my feelings, told me that he had already apologized once and for all for the whole of the deficiencies of the place. This, of course, there had been no need for him to do, for the rest house—on which, by the way, the district fund spent a small fortune—was no concern whatever of his. However,

I said nothing. I was glad enough to see the beggar there (he seemed to have been there the whole afternoon), and to note his attitude of respectful devotion. It seemed to atone a little for my failings.

But, after all, as I call to mind my feelings at that first ceremonial visit, I see that what prevailed was not the sense of the guilt of my own laggard advent, nor of the jarring note of Mrs. Cavisham's surroundings, nor even of the state of ordered, almost sulky, servitude to which Hanbury had already been reduced. It was the knowledge that, with two young ladies, instead of one, to reckon with, I had several notable assumptions to readjust. I had seen Miss Cavisham several times since her arrival, flitting in and out of the bazaar and circling brick red pagoda with brick red guide books in her hand, but even thus she figured for me as little more than a delectable outline, parasoled and swathed beyond recognition against the sun, yet at the same time plainly childish enough to be fitted into almost any relation. It needed no second glance, however, at the shapely being who presided, with an air of condoning detachment, over the thick rest house tea-cups, to show me that, young as Miss Cavisham might be, she was not young enough for all my purposes, and I found that the true predominant note for me that afternoon was one of amazement that no one had at any time during the last three days given me the slightest hint that the third and most important member of Mr. Cavisham's party was not, by many years, the first Mrs. Cavisham.

If I had a doubt, it was dissipated immediately. Mr. Cavisham and his daughter arrived, ready to

drink cups and cups, after a round of sight-seeing which they had chosen, in the plenitude of their energy, to do before tea instead of in the cool of the evening. The removal of Miss Cavisham's upper wrappings disclosed a practical young person, blinking trustful brown eyes, who called Mrs. Cavisham unmistakably "Isabel" and had a quite surprisingly attractive pair of inlaid betel nutcrackers to show for her last raid on the bazaar. Mrs. Cavisham appeared to approve of the purchase and roused herself so far as to order a duplicate through Hanbury. "Write it down, please," she insisted. "You know you forgot that brass Gaudama." And Hanbury wrote it down, gloomily, I marvelling the while.

She was not enthusiastic about the journey to Mindaung. I seemed to have dropped in at a moment when the fate of the expedition trembled in the balance. I had an image as I sat and ate gingerbread biscuits drawn from their primeval tin, of "Isabel" herself holding the scale in a lily hand and wondering languidly which way she should allow it to dip. Hanbury had evidently just been telling her things.

As I asked for my second cup she was ticking off hardships on her fingers. "Two nights on the way," she said. "Rest houses not so good even as this one. No springs to the carts. After all, Matthew, I think I shall have to stop behind here with the ayah."

She said "Matthew," but she looked at me. It was obviously immaterial to me whether she stayed or went, as I should by then have gone on leave,

but I allowed myself to put in a word for the hospitality of Padu. "I'm sure Mr. Hanbury will look after you very nicely if you do stop," I volunteered.

Mr. Cavisham said "Tut, tut! If you stop, we all stop." Hanbury said nothing and twirled the betel nutcrackers, but Miss Cavisham spoke.

"Mr. Hanbury won't be here," she said. "He has got to go up to Mindaung within the next few days. He has a big case to investigate there."

This was news to me. "A big case! What's that?" I enquired, a little rashly.

Hanbury studied the pattern on the crackers with some attention. "A cattle theft," he said. "At Shawbyu, in the Ywathit station jurisdiction."

"What! That Shawbyu case?" I said. I very nearly called it "That good old Shawbyu case?" I knew the hardy perennial well. It had kept Cripps up in the cool for substantial portions of the previous hot weather. I had not disdained last April myself to mount the hill for a few days, to see how our comfortable asset was getting on; but I really thought that the dear good thing had been worked for what it was worth by now. "I had an idea that it had been reported as 'undetected' long ago," I remarked.

Hanbury gazed across to the river with his chin out. "I was thinking of having another shy at it," he murmured stubbornly. "I'm not at all sure that Cripps——"

"I really don't think I can stand the fatigue of the journey," said Mrs. Cavisham.

This time it was at Hanbury that she looked; still, as it were, dangling the balance. Here was a

sufferer torn both ways. "Oh, you must come to Mindaung. Mrs. Cavisham," he growled. "Awfully good for you, you know."

"But you told me yourself——" she said.

"I know. I know I did," he groaned.

"Why can't you measure your wretched Kachins here?" enquired Mrs. Cavisham of her spouse.

Mr. Cavisham tapped her hand sportively with his tea-spoon. "Chins, not Kachins," he corrected.

"It was the Kachins we saw at Bhamo, my dear. Tasselled bags. Don't you remember? These are quite different."

"For their own sake I hope they are!" remarked Mrs. Cavisham, wrinkling her nose. "Don't, Matthew! That spoon's hot. You haven't told me why you can't measure them here."

"Impossible!" Mr. Cavisham assured her, and clucked negation into his tea cup.

Hanbury brightened at a new idea. "Tell you what! Old Than Byu has a top hole cart that I'm sure he'll lend you," he said, with his mouth full of toast. "Springs and all that. Lay a mattress on the bottom and there you are, snug. Snooze all day if you like. I'll wake you up when there's anything to see. That ought to do her, eh? Miss Cavisham."

"Who is Than Byu?" asked Mrs. Cavisham.

"Not met the ancient Than Byu yet?" marvelled Hanbury. "Why, he's the township officer here; under Mr. Chepstowe, you know. Myook. No, I'm wrong. E.A.C. A dear old bird."

"He'll be acting subdivisional officer by the time you start, I expect," I said.

"Moses! You're not off so soon as that, surely?" cried Hanbury.

"Within five or six days," I said. "My leave ought to be in next Saturday's Gazette. I've got a month, and may take an extension. A month will give me three good weeks in India."

"Sister's wedding, isn't it?" said Hanbury.

"I hope she is marrying some one nice," observed Miss Cavisham.

"I've never seen the chap," I said. "Oh, the wedding is only the finish up for me. Where I come in is before, taking the sister and her bridesmaid around. We shall probably be doing the cities."

"Ah, the bridesmaid, what price the bridesmaid?" murmured Hanbury. I looked rather fiercely at him and he grinned as though he knew all about it, which he most emphatically did not.

"Delhi, Agra." I went on. "And old Than Byu is acting for me while I'm on leave. I heard from the Deputy Commissioner to-day. Very convenient, you see. At the end of the month I come back and every one reverts."

"And who acts for Than Byu?" asked Hanbury.

"Guess," I replied.

"Not Maung Myit, surely?" said he.

"Hasn't he told you already?" I enquired.

"I noticed him buzzing around in a new *paso* this afternoon, and wondered what was up," he said. "Won't master have his tail up now, eh?"

"What kind of cart is it?" demanded Mrs. Cavisham. "Can I lie down full length in it?"

"Ab-solutely!" declared Hanbury. "Needn't

stir a finger all day. Take your books in with you. Read when you feel inclined. Sleep when you feel inclined. We shall always be skirmishing round somewhere near."

"We can take it in turns to ride near the cart, can't we?" said Miss Cavisham. "But we can canter on sometimes, of course and wait at *zayats* and things. That is what they call those traveller's sheds, isn't it? And we can take short cuts through the jungle, can't we? Oh, it will be lovely!"

Hanbury assured her that the *zayats* were very much at her service and that it was all as she had said and addressed a final adjuration to Mrs. Cavisham. "Go in your habit," he said. "We can have a pony led behind and when you feel inclined for a little exercise, why out you pop and there you jolly well are."

The picture was alluring. "I should like to be able to ride too," said Mrs. Cavisham. "Matthew, I think we shall have to let it depend upon what the Smiths say. If they are really ready to take the house on for the odd fortnight, we might perhaps do it. But don't ask me again till the English mail is in. Then I'll think of it."

CHAPTER V

TWO or three days later, on my way back from office, the English mail that was to settle Mrs. Cavisham's business incidentally settled mine. I met the postman at the gate of the compound and, out of the corner of my eye, watched him stand first on one leg and then on the other while I went through his letters, selecting and rejecting. Then I stood among the orange marigolds to read my sister Maria's effusion.

It seemed a long time after this that I slipped the folded sheet mechanically back into its envelope. I started tearing the detestable thing across, and just in time I held my hand. I knew I should want to read it again—some day! I must have done to my riding switch what I should have liked to do to the letter, for the next thing I remember was Daniel, my Madrasi boy, to whom I gave my hat as I stepped into the hall, having his fussy little comment on the obvious.

"Master done broken his stick," he said, evidently in doubt as to what to do with the four pieces I gravely handed to him.

"That stick's no good, Daniel," I recollect saying, very quietly, for I was half ashamed of myself already. "Get another one in the bazaar

to-morrow." And then I went in and had tea, and was even able to realize that it was very much better tea than what they had given me the other day at the rest house.

Really it was rather ludicrous. One might easily have thought, by the fuss I made, that Ada Meredith had definitely accepted and as definitely jilted me, whereas, in point of fact, there was not and never had been so much as an understanding between us. Not that that mattered to me. I had always seemed to detect a special quality in our intercourse and had grown to take things terribly for granted. When I try to illustrate my precious attitude in the matter, I can think of nothing more apt than a certain sanguine phrase, that in some form or other has reached some of us from beyond the footlights, where hero and heroine, appropriately pallid, face each other in tense communion. The fateful question has been put, and "How can I marry you?" falters the maiden. "How can I marry you when I have no love for you?" Hark to the rejoinder. Hear the impassioned "Dear one! What does that matter? Haven't I love enough for both of us?" Thus the swain, with chest out and half an eye on the gods, who thrill responsive. In our case, you must understand, Miss Meredith and I had descended to nothing so concrete as question and answer, but I can see, all the same, that it was with much the same melodramatic straddle that I had faced the world during the last eighteen months, and if anyone had urged that, definite as my intentions might be, there was nothing to show that the

lady's were in the least fixed, I should have found an all sufficient rejoinder in the announcement that I had intentions enough for the pair or us.

As I finally thrust 'he letter away into my pocket, I seemed to hear again that ribald murmur of Hanbury's. "What price the bridesmaid?" "What price, indeed!"

Later on, as I lit my pipe after tea, I began wondering whether, as a matter of fact, anyone could have had more than a shadowy guess at what my feelings were at this crisis. She and I had always been the best of friends, and my sister had more than once hinted jestingly at what was sure to be the outcome of the trip the three of us were to make together; but that was all. I pulled out Maria's letter to see what light I could get from a re-reading. The expression "That little horror, Ada," caught my eye. It was what had first jumped at me, so to speak, from the fervid scrawl and had made me brace myself to meet a thump of fortune, but, reading it, I could see that the passage merely echoed my sister's disgust at seeing all her long-laid plans upset. There was no hint of indignation at the scandalous way in which I had been treated.

"That little horror, Ada, has gone and got engaged to one of the Archers and now absolutely refuses to come out as my bridesmaid. If the wretch had let me know a week earlier, I might have been able to make some kind of arrangement, but I can't now. Everything depended on her. It means that that trip to Agra is off at any rate, of course."

I didn't know why "of course," unless it was

because, as I had half suspected, old Meredith was paying my sister's expenses of the tour as well as his daughter's. For the matter of that, I would willingly have paid for Maria myself. However, it was not to be thought of now. And, in any case, there was no talk in the letter of my harrowed feelings! The secret had been well kept.

"So I've definitely settled to be married at home after all and have wired to Claude to apply for three months' leave and take me out in March, before the hot weather begins. It's too sickening for words! We were to have started next Thursday. I've had to stop my heavy baggage. I'm so frightfully sorry I couldn't let you know before, but wires are so ruinous, and I've been reckoning on Claude's letting you know by letter. I suppose you can cancel your leave if you have applied for it."

Claude had, of course, not let me know by letter. I doubt whether he knew my address. I certainly did not know his. Naturally, I could cancel my leave. Had it, by the way, been notified? I tore the wrapper off the Gazette that had come by the same post as Maria's letter. There were the announcements, sure enough—Mr. R. Chepstowe, Assistant Commissioner, one month's privilege leave. Maung Than Byu, Extra Assistant Commissioner, to the charge of the Padu subdivision. Maung Myit, head clerk in the Padu subdivisional office, to officiate as a Myook etc., etc. At the same time it was not too late, even now. No one had formally made over charge yet. A telegram to the Deputy Commissioner would suffice to stay

all further action—And yet—Oh! perdition take it!

Only that morning Maung Myit, supported by his wife and four (or was it five?) olive branches, had come to offer ceremonial thanks for my share in his happy elevation. I can see the party still. Mrs. Myit, in pale blue scarf and silk *tamein* to match, was short and stout, with a complexion like an omelette and the shiniest of black top-knots. The infants stared and sniffed and slobbered, a cluster of bulbous shorn heads over a row of diminutive white jackets. Two of them had sore eyes. The baby wore a crocheted cap of pink and yellow wool. Between us on a brass tray on the floor lay the thank-offering displayed, a silvery carp and a box of ice-cream wafers; and it is still fresh with me how, every time a sense of favours bestowed doubled the little lady up—hands to floor, forehead on hands—her sleek coiffure tipped the edge of the platter and made the biscuit tin jump. How I ever got rid of them I cannot say. Each of the children had to be pushed through a ritual of grateful prostration before the family crept backwards out of my presence, leaving me with a passionate vow on my lips never on any account to recommend my head clerk for promotion again. And now, if I cancelled my leave, I was bound to have another visit. There would be no more carp, but there might be tears, prayers for reconsideration, certainly a recital and re-recital of old woes. And then—oh, confound it! there was the wretched understrapper who was down to act for Maung Myit, full of the brown boots he had

launched out in on the strength of it; to say nothing of old Than Byu, cozened out of the honour and glory of a subdivision. I positively couldn't bear to think of it.

"Damn!" I said, and got up and looked out of the window.

In the clear afternoon sunlight three figures were treading the path that ran below the ruined brick terrace on which my bungalow stood. In two of them I recognized Miss Cavisham and her father. It had not escaped me that Mrs. Cavisham never accompanied her husband and stepdaughter on their excursions into the village. I had reasons for knowing that she usually consoled herself with Hanbury at the rest house. To-day she must have had some other solace. At first I thought that the third figure was some acquaintance of the Cavishams', newly arrived by the mail boat that had brought me Maria's letter, but a passing military policeman's salute showed me that it was Hanbury, Hanbury playing truant and obviously enjoying it. The three of them were dawdling in front of a pagoda that rose white and gold against the tamarind trees. Miss Cavisham's arm was up, as though to point to some taking feature, and I as good as got a glimpse of the redoubtable red guide book. Should we three have looked anything like that, I wondered—Ada and Maria and I—had our designs on the cities of India ever borne fruit, and culminated in a "doing" of, say, the Taj? Would Ada have gone armed with a volume like that? Should I have stooped, as Hanbury was stooping, to consult an authoritative page with her? Should I have

stepped, as he stepped, to some coign of vantage, and called on her to share it? From where I stood I could see that there was a surprising amount of stooping and stepping and calling. The rascal was really most attentive, upon my soul! every bit as attentive as I should have been with——

It was while I was dimly resolving never to think of her again as "Ada," that there filtered into my consciousness a desire to know what business, if you please, it was of mine whether Hanbury or anyone else was attentive to Miss Cavisham or not. The very idea of its being my business was grotesque when one examined it, but the fact that it had showed its silly head at all seemed to open up a new aspect of things, to clear a vista hitherto blocked, and gave me a half-forgotten sensation, an evasive something which I failed at first to associate with Maria's letter, but which, as acquaintance improved, I found I could trace back to that portentous document; the queerest and saddest sense of——well, it was hard to define it, but could I call it freedom?

In the Law, among countless other matters of weight, are enjoined upon the wearers of the Yellow Robe commands as to their bearing in the presence of members of the opposite sex. Modesty can hardly go further. When he takes his walks abroad the monk must pace decorously, with eyes glued to the ground so many cubits ahead of his bare feet, and never lift his glance to let it rest on a woman's face, not even though she be his own mother or sister. So runs the Precept, perhaps about as

much honoured in the observance as three-fifths of the "Thou shalt nots" of other creeds. I had no idea how far the above interdict was really supposed to seal the vision of casual devotees like my friend Maung Myit, but if that young man had taken his late sojourn in the monastery at all seriously (and who was I to say he had not?), I thought I could picture some of his feelings when he was permitted to raise his eyes again and let them rove without fear of offence. I had certainly not realized it at the time, but for the last year I too had been walking this earth with my looks as steadfastly bent earthwards as those of the strictest Buddhist anchorite.

The trio by the pagoda below sauntered slowly out of sight and left me twiddling a blue pencil in my hand, as far as ever from being able to make up my mind about cancelling my leave. A fiery phrase or two in Maria's letter came back to me and stirred me to a bilious mirth. The poor dear thing was horribly cross, and who, in like case, would not have been? It was outrageous throwing a travelling companion over at the eleventh hour as Miss Meredith had done. And all for a man like Archer! That was what beat me. I knew it must be Tommy Archer, the darkest and best looking of the three pillars of our local golf club at home. If she could treat Maria so cavalierly, what was to prevent her from throwing Archer too over in due course? I began to contract a very fine compassion for Thomas. I saw him in my imaginings, as I had often seen him, bound Citywards, brooding behind his morning paper, nibbling moodily at his

black moustache, sent callously about his business again after a month or so of glowering rapture on the very flimsiest of pretexts by this young . . . She was quite capable of it ! " Little devil ! " I said, knowing well that she had given me no encouragement and that I was just a peevish, unmannerly ass——

I felt I must do something. Why not join the three I had just seen on the path below, and show them the Shwezigon ? I could catch them up in a minute or two. I had kept cloister too long. Why should I always be an unsociable hound ?

The access of good-fellowship passed quicker than it came. What the deuce was I thinking of ? This of all evenings of the year to choose for dropping my bearishness. The thing still rankled and my mood was non-gregarious. I was fit for nothing but my usual rogue elephant prowl along the river's bank.

Everywhere, on the sunlit palms and the red pagoda walls, on the river with its dotted islands, lay the peace of evening. The hour breathed calm around me, but I was out of tune with the hour. Stray maledictions echoed in my ears as I picked up a stick and walked downstairs. In the verandah on the ground floor my Burman servant slept the sleep of the just, barely in the shade. His orange head-cloth lay on the boards beside him. His black hair streamed.

And there, outside, at the gate, on the edge of the brick terrace, in white, with the warm sky behind her, stood Mrs. Cavisham.

CHAPTER VI

I WAS fairly cornered.

Speechless too ! With my wits about me the plausible phrase might have come, and I could have got past her and away. As it was, my present turmoil of soul lifted me out of the region of subterfuges. I could only stand and stare, conscious that, on this my day of wrath, I had to be civil to this woman till fate delivered me out of her hand ; possibly to see her home, to say nice things to her. If it had been a minute later our meeting ground would have been on the no-man's land of the path below ; there would have been no sacred rites of hospitality to discharge ; I should have had time to assume an air of pre-occupation and despatch (as of one bound, say, for an urgent hospital Committee meeting) that would have carried me past her with the barest exchange of civilities. But here she was, in the shadow of my hibiscus, practically under my roof. It was too late. I believe I raised my hat, but cannot be sure I did.

" Won't you come in and sit down ? " I found myself saying. It was so very much the sort of thing I did not want to say that some inner consciousness told me that nothing else would do.

She seemed to shimmer in the sunlight as she advanced, with daintily lifted skirt, through the nasturtiums. "Of course I will," she said. "What a blessing! This heat is killing. I felt I must rest somewhere. That's why I made for shelter. So this is your house, is it? How convenient!"

My Burman had scrambled suddenly to life, blinking as he adjusted his orange head-cloth and dragged easy chairs from the deeper recesses of the verandah. She selected one, tried it, and then sank into another.

I watched her much as I might have watched a cat settling down into my best cushion. "I've got a more comfortable one still upstairs," I remarked with some emphasis. "Shall I send for it?"

She acknowledged the tone of my query with a lift of her sleek eyebrows. "This will do charmingly, thanks," she assured me, stretching out her feet. "Now I wonder whether you can get me a fan."

I screwed up my mouth. "Ah, so do I," I said. It was no use explaining that I had no fan. A fan had to be produced. I shifted the burden on to Daniel, who had emerged from his godown and was fidgeting with officious hands at his waist-band.

"Daniel," I said, "bring a fan."

Daniel gaped. "Master not got any fan," he affirmed.

"Then go and make one, ass!" I snapped, and, finding no understrapper to catch by the arm and gesticulate the order on to, he departed hotfoot on

his errand of creation. I looked at my boots while she commented (with a note of mellow reprobation for my shocking manners) on her surroundings—the garden, the view, the contour of the brick terrace. She was good enough to approve of the outlook; wished she could make a sketch of the place, but wanted to know why I had no roses. I did not see fit to tell her why.

Daniel the resourceful had actually got hold of a fan when he reappeared; a small square of matting fastened flag-like to a bamboo handle; the kind of thing the cook flaps life into the kitchen flame with. A tried Anglo-Indian housewife would have recoiled in horror from it. Mrs. Cavisham, new to the East, with no associations to hold her, was not above plying it freely. To see her waving the wretched thing, blissfully ignorant of the base uses to which it was usually applied, put me in a rather better temper.

"Will you have something to drink?" I asked, gazing out over the river.

"Not if you ask me like that," she replied. "Look at me and ask me nicely."

I repeated my invitation with my eyes on her. She gave me a grave return glance and thought she would have a baby. "No thanks, no whisky," she said. "And no course not unless you have something too."

"No, I've just had tea," I replied.

"So have I," she said, "but I don't call that a reason. Look here, I don't think I'll have that soda if you are not going to keep me in countenance."

I glanced over my shoulder. "Daniel," I said,

with some deliberation. "One baby soda for Missis."

She lay for a while with her eyes shut, fanning herself. When she condescended to look at me again, it was as though she had been thinking me over and was going to make an effort to be interested in my tantrums.

"Have you got fever?" she asked.

"No," said I.

"Then what's the matter with you?"

I lifted my head. "What makes you think there is anything the matter with me?" I demanded.

"You're different to what you generally are," she remarked.

"You've only seen me once before," I exclaimed. "How do you know what I'm generally like?" My equanimity was gradually returning. "Don't say that Hanbury has led you to expect much of me?" I laughed.

She refused to drag Hanbury in; in fact she refused to drag anyone in for a time, but lay silent, fanning herself gently. "Are you going to tell me what's the matter?" she enquired at last.

I thought she might just as well have it. "Well, if you want to know," I said, "I've just had some news that has upset me rather."

"By the English mail?" she asked.

"By the English mail," I replied.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh!" She spoke as though she had been to some trifling extent rewarded by the disclosure for the trouble she had taken in probing me. She reached down to flick at a mosquito that was hovering round her foolish open work

ankles. I sat still watching her, curious to see what she would do: whether she would now think she ought to withdraw and leave me alone with my grief. Not that I wanted to get rid of her now. Having had my say, I was beginning to feel quite unpardonably at ease with her, but I did long to "pile it on," just to see if I really could make my news upsetting enough to drive her out of her comfortable chair into the hot evening air.

I thought that she was debating something of the sort inwardly. She did not speak for some little time, but when she did it was to say "You've got your English mail then. I call it disgraceful that we haven't yet. They're really very slack about readdressing our letters from Mandalay. Who ought I to see about it? You're not responsible, I suppose, among other things, for the post office here."

"No, I'm afraid I'm no good," I admitted, a little blankly.

"Well" she said after another pause. "Won't you tell me what the bad news was?"

Positively I should have liked to say, like Maung Myit, that I had lost a valued parent, to see how she would take it. What I did say was "Suppose I said that I had heard that some one I was very fond of was dead."

"That's not it. I don't believe you," she said quickly, over the top of her fan.

"Well, no, it isn't," I was forced lamely to admit, "but it might have been for all you know."

She did not seem to see it at all. "Well, if it isn't that, what is it?" she demanded.

I was clearly not making much out of her, but I could hardly refuse her now. "My sister's wedding," I explained. "I spoke about it the other day. She's not coming out to India for it after all."

She stopped fanning herself for the first time and faced round towards me with an air of virtue rewarded. "Broken off?" she asked cheerfully.

"She's going to be married at home," I said.

"I see," she exclaimed, thoroughly interested. "So you won't get that trip to India, then! That's what's the matter, is it?"

"That, I suppose, is what's the matter," I growled, with a sudden sense of the matter's extreme pettiness.

"Well, if it's nothing more than that——" she said. "Good gracious! By the way you began I thought you had—I don't know what I didn't think might have happened to you. You looked as if you had been ruined!"

She made me feel like an unreasonable urchin whimpering over a broken toy. "Well, in a way it is more than that," I cried. "It means that—well, anyhow, I don't like having my plans upset."

"Is there anybody who does?" she asked. "Look at me, now. This evening——"

"There's your baby soda at last," I said. "You may as well drink it."

"Of course I'm going to drink it," she replied. "Put it down, please, and don't interrupt. Only this evening I made up my mind to go out for a walk with the others. I wanted to get some more of that lacquer work. I told the ayah to wake me in time. I dressed before tea; I made all my

arrangements ; I took a lot of trouble ; and, behold, when I came out of my room into the verandah, I found the wretches had slunk off without a word to me—not a word ! ”

“ Had you told them you were coming ? ” I asked.

“ Good gracious, Mr. Chepstowe ! couldn't they have asked me ? ” she cried. “ You know the rest house ; all mat partitions and transparent purdahs ; like living in a dirty clothes basket. One can't turn in bed without being heard all over the building ! They must have known I was getting ready. They could have asked me what I was going to do this evening without stirring a finger. I was furious of course. Talking about having your plans upset—— ! ”

She sipped her soda, and, allowing herself to change her mind, admitted a thought of whisky into it. Finally she sat up in her chair and drew on her gloves.

“ I'm not going to be done out of my walk all the same,” she informed me. “ Mr. Chepstowe, I want you to take me where they sell those yellow and black boxes ; the little kind, I mean. And you might bring a servant with you to carry them. Of course they went off leaving me with nobody ! ”

In the presence of her greater wrongs I had to put my trivial worries behind me.

We made our way, with the youth of the orange silk *gaungbaung* behind us, down from the bungalow to the level of the village. The shadows of the palms were creeping up the slope ; the river was ablaze below the western hills. In the gloom of a

low-roofed shop, which comes back to me as a medley of bamboo matting and brown teak carving, half smothered by a lowering banyan, she made her choice of lacquer work from the piled ranks of red and black and yellow. We listened while our attendant settled the price with a husky jovial shopwoman, the onlookers and neighbours approving. We saw the purchases off to the rest house. Then, skirting a cluster of thatched hovels, banana girt, and a cactus hedge, we wound through a belt of tamarinds and pipals into the sunshine of the river's bank. Here stretched a flat expanse of sand, dimpled with a myriad footprints up to the water's edge, where figures clustered in the glow, bathers and loafers and water-drawers. There was a line of dug-outs, and a small stern-wheel launch shed its steam into the sky like an evening sacrifice. Near us was moored a bamboo raft with its thatched huts on its back for the raftsmen, and presently, under the pink sandstone bluffs upstream a low, black-hulled cargo steamer crept into sight. The sound of its booming whistle brooded over the landscape. Behind us, in the east, a creamy moon was rising and Mindaung lifted its blue bulk from the yellow and green of the sunlit plain, its peak buried in a flat canopy of cloud. Here and there, from a distant clump of verdure that marked a village, a glass-topped pagoda spire would catch the last of the sun and send out a signal flash.

"I don't want you to talk," she said, willing to spare me; and, this falling in finely with my mood, I obeyed.

Evening drew down as we walked. From a shrine

crowned with tinkling bells we saw the sky redden and the cargo boat swing like a big swart night-bird in to the bank, throbbing in response to the jerky trill of the telegraph; heard the splash of the lascars leaping overboard with the hawser, watched their black heads bobbing in the reflected glow as they swam to land, and marked the gradual drift of noiseless figures towards the point where piled sacks and bales and the early flare of refreshment stalls marked the landing *ghat*. Empty carts passed us in the gloaming, creaking softly through the sand, and returned laden; slim dusky shapes with water-pots came and went—and still we lingered on. Twice I suggested a move, but she would not hear of it. "Not till we can see our way home by moonlight," she insisted, and then, and not till then, we turned from the river to face the moon. It was a change from black and scarlet to black and silver. Mindaung was a dove-grey shadow with its cloud-cap a primrose halo above it in the sky, and the nearer palm tops bristled with spear points of white light. We threaded our way through a piebald grove, silent and content to be silent. Here and there a dog barked in the moonshine, but we saw no living soul during our passage through the sentinel stems. It was not till we were clear of the trees that she spoke.

"We're off to Mindaung to-morrow," she informed me.

"You've got your mail, then?" said I.

"Well," she said, "the letter we were looking out for turned up all right."

"What time shall I send the pony

round?" I asked. "You'll be starting early, I suppose?"

She shrugged a doubt. "That Hanbury boy talked about getting off by seven," she said. "If they get me away by eight, they may consider themselves lucky."

"I'll come and see you off," I said.

The moonlight just showed her smile. She said nothing, however, but "Do, by all means."

The high-piled rest house, with its attendant palms topped the slope ahead of us, dominating the sky line. "I really must take your arm," she said. "I shall never be able to get to the top of the hill by myself."

She slipped her hand under my elbow. I tried to think it was just like taking her in to dinner and failed. It was hardly fair on a retiring bachelor. I hoped to goodness she would let go before we reached the rest house and Hanbury's unintelligent neighbourhood. Did I look an awful fool? I felt one!

The touch of my arm seemed to have brought me and my concerns closer to her. "And when do you go yourself?" she asked.

"I don't know," I grumbled, my tribulation all before me again at her words. "Probably not at all."

"You'll stop on here?" she asked.

"I expect so," I said. "I think I shall cancel my leave. There's no object in my taking it now."

"How provoking!" she murmured, and for a moment I thought she was going to commiserate me, but what she did say was quite unexpected.

"What has the bridesmaid got to say to it?" she asked suddenly.

Her hand was still on my elbow. She must have felt me wince.

"Say to what?" I asked doggedly.

"To the wedding being put off?" said she.

"It's she herself who's responsible for everything," I told her. "She declines to come out with my sister."

"And why?" she enquired.

I gave a snort. "She has done what other people have done before her," I said. "She finds she had rather be at her own wedding than at my sister's."

"Got engaged, has she?" she cried. "Well, but good gracious, can't your sister come out without her?"

"She can, but she won't," I made answer.

She was turning the thing over as we covered the next few yards. "It's that, then, that has really upset you, isn't it?" she observed at last.

"What? my sister's not coming out?" I enquired.

She had no opinion for my insight. "Good heavens, no, the bridesmaid's not coming out?" she returned. As she spoke she seemed to be testing my funny bone like a pulse.

I said nothing, and really, with her hand where it was, there was no need of words for her to read me. "Never mind," she murmured almost coaxingly. I think I must have half tried to withdraw my arm, for I felt her grasp tighten.

For the second time that day I found myself using strong language. There was no audible

sound, but I know she felt the thrill of the suppressed expletives, and it only served to draw her closer to me. "Never mind," she said again. "Don't cancel your leave. Come up with us to Mindaung and spend it with us there."

"Impossible!" I remember saying blankly.

CHAPTER VII

THE pony I was lending for the expedition left, in charge of a svce, before I got out of bed. I heard it neighing on the road outside the stables while it was still dark.

I had settled to follow it to the rest house at about eight. What I had seen and heard the evening before, after restoring Mrs. Cavisham to her harassed comfort, had shown me that if that lady allowed herself to be removed to her cart by eight o'clock that morning, it would only be because the other members of the party had been exceptionally well-behaved. In fact, having named eight to me, she had given the others to understand that, after what had happened that afternoon, it would almost certainly be nine.

I remembered how the three had sat facing her, after this intimation, round the rest house table, all looking rather streaky and pallid in the lamp light; long empty tumbles in front of them; the white tablecloth littered with their purchases of the day—macque and brass work and a goggling jointed green *papier mâché* dragon. They had been duly reprimanded for their desertion of her, and Miss Cavisham alone was trying to stand up to her upbraidings. Hanbury was speechless, revolted at even the semblance of a "turn up." Old

Cavisham was capable of nothing but explanatory bleatings—"Never before, dearest, you know! How were we to tell?"—but his daughter carried the war straight into the enemy's country and gaily charged her stepmother with a deliberate attempt at evasion so as to secure my escort (if you please!) into the bazaar. "Now we know why she was so quiet in her room, papa! I believe you had made an appointment with her, Mr. Chepstowe!" Mrs. Cavisham's rich contralto of repudiation more or less cleared the air. "Appointment! My dear, you should have seen his face when I turned up!" and it lay with me, of course, with all eyes focused on me, to try and fail to remember the occasion, and then to grin and protest that my demeanour had meant sheer rapture subtly dissembled. It was all very funny, but it is a fact that I felt mighty sheepish, and at the moment was all ready to call Mrs. Cavisham a flippant young minx; but later I saw that I had simply had to be sacrificed to save the situation. Altogether, for all her hot white face and tumbled hair, the girl remained—I cannot say why—the most gracious memory of the evening before, and now, as I stared out of the window over the steam of my early morning tea, I had to acknowledge that it was more for her sake than for Mrs. Cavisham's that I was going round to say good-bye, and found myself planning that my first official act, after I had cancelled my leave, should be to run up to Mindaung—on duty, of course—just to see how Hanbury was getting on with——

What particular business of Hanbury's

poking my nose into had for the present to be left vague. I was bashfully wondering whether, after all, that Shawbyu case might really with decency be exhumed, when the sudden sight of carts and riders topping the ridge that connected the rest house with the Mindaung road sent me with a jump to my watch and from my watch to the clock that hung in my office room below. A moment later I stood faced with the fact that it was a quarter past seven and that the Cavishams and Hanbury were already on their way to Mindaung. My field glasses gave me a vision of Mr. Cavisham's long docile back above the dun quarters of my own lent steed, and of two more mettlesome figures in khaki tittupping ahead of him. I could not see the odd yellow matting tilt of Maung Than Byu's cart in the train, but there were plenty of ordinary rounded covers, and it was as clear as the sunlight on Mr. Cavisham's preposterous white pagri that his wife had been unexpectedly accommodating and that I, in my pyjamas and with my own pony unsaddled, had lost my opportunity of seeing her off.

At first I had half a mind to dress quickly and ride after the cavalcade, but reflection showed that it was too late. Nor was I altogether sorry to have missed Mrs. Cavisham, who, in her own way, frightened me not a little. I should have liked to see the girl again, however, not white and jaded after a hot evening's shopping, but in the saddle, with the bite of the morning on her cheeks and the foretaste of a brisk canter in her eyes. Ever since Maria's devastating letter had reached me, I had been looking around for philosophic balm and had

unearthed a little comfort from a cold-blooded refrain which assured me that "there's a lot of good fish in the sea." Ordinarily there would have been no need to press this assurance, but, believe me, it was desperately hard for me, tucked away thus in Padu, with never a white woman to speak to and nothing but flat brown faces to compare a cherished image with, to lay its mitigating message fully to heart. "Easy enough when one's near the sea!" I scoffed, feeling that I should be helped enormously if, in my soreness, I could have my memory refreshed by a glimpse or two of at least one other good fish, even if it were destined for someone else's net. I was not going to poach. Honestly, I did not grudge Hanbury anything he could come by; but, after all, my news of the day before could not but have thrown me a trifle out of gear, and it was only human that I should pine at least for a change of scene and for a little Christian society.

And that reminded me.

I put the field glasses on the table and sitting down quickly, I scribbled a telegram to the Deputy Commissioner asking that my leave might be cancelled.

I always wonder now what would have happened if after writing the message, I had sent it to the telegraph office. As it chanced to happen, the durwan was not within hail, and laziness and, it may have been, the image of Maung Myit's reproachful eyes, made me defer the evil day and leave the telegraph form on my writing table.

How it came about that the wire was never sent, let the following attest. Let me at once say that

Maung Myit, with his reproachful eyes, had nothing to do with it.

I took my solitary ride not inland along the Mindaung road, but southward by the river bank, and the sun was high and my pony in a cheerful lather when I reached the bungalow again, making a short cut through the back way, to find Daniel squatting in animated conversation with several of his own dusky breed in the narrowing shadow of the servant's quarters. At my approach the group melted away with all the airs and graces of a gang of gamblers in the presence of a police patrol. There was a woman among them, a Madrasi, who chose to vanish round the corner of the cook house. Only just round. I could still see a portion of a white skirt protruding when Daniel reached my side.

"Is that your wife, Daniel?" I asked, pointing.

Daniel posed ordinarily as a bachelor, but had intermittent spasms of matrimony. I never knew where I was with Daniel. However, this time it was apparently quite plain.

"Not my wife, sir," he grinned. "That Mrs. Cash'm's ayah."

"What is she doing here?" I asked. "Why hasn't she gone with her mistress to Mindaung?"

"Can't say, sir," said he. "She done brought one letter."

There, in fact, was the letter, a neat grey-blue note. He drew it from between the leaves of the penny copybook that lay on the top of his godown steps and handed it to me, using the copybook as an impromptu tray.

"From Mrs. Cavisham?" I asked.

He stared back at me. "Don't 'know, sir," he replied.

I looked at the handwriting. "You don't mean to say she's still here?" I cried with terror in my heart.

"That ayah not saying," he told me, with the stare still on his face.

I tore the envelope open. At the first words that reached me "*I have not gone with the others,*" my jaw and my reins dropped simultaneously. I caught Daniel's eye and pulled myself together. In the circling eddy of feelings an instinct of self-preservation came uppermost.

"Daniel," I said, "there's a telegram lying on my writing table. Has it been sent to the telegraph office yet?"

"Sent, sir," he replied.

"Who sent it?" I roared.

"Not done finished sent!" he babbled, eagerly. "That chuprassie not come back from the bazaar yet. Sending now, sir."

"Stop it!" I said. "Don't send it! Put it back on my table! Where's that ayah?"

The woman emerged almost before the words were out of my mouth and approached with a smirk and a desire to know whether she was to take back any answer. I looked at the letter for enlightenment.

"*I have not gone with the others* (the wretched thing ran). *They made a fuss, of course, but I told them I should be perfectly all right here with the ayah and Mr. Hanbury's orderly sleeping in the house, to say nothing*

of you close at hand. They are too absurd! It will only be for a few days. You'll keep an eye on me, won't you? I shall be in to tea this afternoon if you should care to look in."

"No answer," I said, and got off my pony.

I walked upstairs to my bath in a whirl. As I mounted the steps I tore up the blue-grey missive with grim deliberation. Upstairs I reduced my telegram to shreds and sent it after the blue-grey bits into the waste paper basket. Then I wrote and despatched a note to Maung Than Byu to say that I should be ready to make over charge of the office to him that very afternoon preparatory to going on leave. The idea, I may mention, had been to do the making over the next day, but you must see that the matter had suddenly grown urgent.

You may say what you like, but for real transcendent prudery commend me to the unsophisticated bachelor whose lot has been cast in the wilds. Why, in the name of fortune, I asked myself furiously, had the woman altered her plans at the eleventh hour? Had she actually realized that she and I were the only Europeans left in the station, that there were no more white folk whatever, that we must necessarily be thrown together, must see each other—the centre of interest for a horde of prying native menials? Did she imagine we were going to take our walks abroad together? Did she purpose clinging to my arm every time there was a hill to be gone up, pinching my elbow, asking me all about my joys and sorrows? Were we to be seen thus by the whole village, by any stray British tourist who happened to look in at Padu on his way

to the ruins at Mahananda ? Was she going to ignore the fact that I was a rank misogynist, an ill-conditioned recluse who would have no dealings whatever with the opposite sex ?

The woman was beside herself ! What would she want me to do next ? "The Lord preserve me from poodle-faking !" was how I phrased it to myself, but that was only the fringe of the matter. The image of Mrs. Grundy rose colossal before me. I was positively frightened.

CHAPTER VIII

OFTEN during the sultry afternoon I wondered whether Maung Than Byu, with his solemn old spectacled face puckered in doubt below the jauntiest of Cambridge-blue silk head-kerchiefs, had any idea how nearly he had escaped the labour of "taking over." He was of the old school, was Than Byu ; an Upper Burman, son of an ex-minister and ignorant of English. He got no pecuniary benefit from the shuffle that my leave entailed, and towards the end of the day I could tell that he counted the mere honour of a subdivision for a month but barren recompense for all he was undergoing. By four o'clock everything except the sub-treasury had passed from me to him ; still, the sub-treasury was no bagatelle, and it was while we were wrestling with the stamps, shortly before a notable interruption, that I caught a look which told me that, had he known all, the old gentleman would have cursed me solemnly for tearing up that telegram about my leave.

I remember we were half way through the non-judicial stamps when we were disturbed. You must figure us at our labours inside the treasure vault, a uncompromising three-sided brick erection outside the subdivisional office. There was just room

for my chair within, alongside the open safe. I sat with two bulky registers on my knees and an indelible pencil in my hand, diligently ticking off totals. Than By and the sub-accountant squatted on a mat at my feet manipulating the contents of the safe. Outside, the policeman in charge of the treasury guard peered, yawning, through the iron grating. I can recall now the damp odour of the brick-work, the sickly smell that came from the Government opium chest in the corner, and the wheezy crackle of the dusty brown paper envelopes that held the stamps. It was across this that I heard the voice of the havildar in a hoarse unaccustomed whisper, as of one announcing a portent; "Sahib! Sahib!" and looking up, with my pencil in my mouth, saw Mrs. Cavisham standing trim and fragrant in the doorway.

I had expected nothing quite so deliberate as this. For all that, I was not nervous. The moment was propitious. My freedom was almost within my grasp now, and, entrenched thus among my registers, I felt immeasurably sheltered and warded. I could even afford to be airy. "Good evening, Mrs. Cavisham," I said. "Sorry I can't get up." (I made a gesture of effort, as though each of my big books weighed a hundredweight.) "Shockingly busy, you see. I was going to answer your note this evening. It *was* a surprise and no mistake!"

She looked me up and down with an air of proprietary benignance. "You've got to be very nice to me," she said.

I sucked hard at my pencil. "Are you out for a constitutional?" I enquired.

She gave me a glance from under the brim of her sun hat as though she thought I ought to have known better. "I am not in the habit of taking constitutionals alone," she observed.

"Excuse me," I said, bowing over my work. "Two hundred and forty-three," and I made a tick in the register.

The business of stamp counting had suddenly stopped. Old Than Byu adjusted his spectacles, glanced up at our visitor, acknowledged her presence by a courtly motion of his joined hands, and looked for his cue to me.

"Go on," I said to him in Burmese; and to her, "I hope you won't mind our finishing our job. It's important."

"How long will you be?" she asked.

"About another quarter of an hour," I replied.

"I'll wait, then," she said. "I want you to take me out on to the river this evening."

"It may be half an hour," I faltered.

"Not if I am waiting," she softly assured me, gathering up her skirts. The two Burmans shifted so as to admit her into the vault. The sub-accountant dusted the top of the safe with the end of his mauve and white *paso* just as though she had ordered him to. It was not as comfortable a seat as she had had in my verandah yesterday, but it served. The sentry at the grating was reinforced by two companions. There was no more yawning outside, I can tell you.

"One rupee eight anna stamps. How many?" I demanded, savagely, and the Burmans counted.

Over the top of the register I could see her fine

red lips curling as she watched us. "I had no idea you had to do this sort of thing!" she said, after a while. We had finished the non-judicial and were passing on to the court fee stamps, and there was a momentary lull.

"What sort of things did you think I had to do?" I asked, initialing industriously.

"I thought you tried cases and made roads and settled what taxes the people were to pay," she said. "This! Why it's like stock-taking at a linen draper's. Why should you have to do it? Do you sell those stamps?"

"To be sure," I returned.

"Can I buy one now?" she asked. "I have a nephew who collects."

"I think not," I replied, hoisting up a fresh register.

"Can't you trust the clerks to do this?" she demanded.

"Ah, if I only could!" I sighed, running my finger down a column. "One moment, please. Our friend wants to put those envelopes back into the safe. Would it be too much to ask you to sit with your feet the other way round? Then he can open the door without disturbing you. Thanks, that's right now. Well, Maung Than Byu. Court fees. One anna. How many?"

"I suppose you do some other kind of work sometimes," she conjectured.

"When I get a chance," I returned. "Two sheets, and three over; that's correct. Yes, I tried a chap this morning and some time I shall have to go and see him flogged. After that——"

"But how often do you do *this* sort of thing?" she asked.

"This stamp counting? Not often, thank heaven!" I replied. "Still," I went on (it had to come out some time!) "one has got to do it whether one likes it or not when—when one's making over charge."

"Oh," she said, "you're making over charge, are you? Who to?"

I pointed with my indelible pencil at the elderly Maung Than Byu, who had just finished a calculation. "Hullo!" I went on. "Two hundred and sixty-two, he says, and the register says two hundred and sixty-three. There's something wrong. Excuse me, how many sheets of stamps have they just laid down by you, Mrs. Cavisham?"

"Seven," she replied. "No, eight. Good gracious, I'm sitting on one! Eight. If there are any stamps missing, who has to pay?"

"I have to," I said. "I'm responsible till I've given over charge."

"How very unfair!" she cried. "By the way, giving over charge doesn't mean that you are taking your leave after all, does it?"

"That's precisely what it does mean," I returned, trying, but failing, to be brazen.

"I thought you were going to cancel your leave," she exclaimed.

I did my best to touch it lightly. "Oh, I've thought better of it," I remarked, with my head down, marking rough memoranda on a slip of paper.

"Oh!" she said very deliberately. Then she quickened. "In that case——" she began.

"Eight sheets, you said," I cut in volubly. "Eight thirty-twos are two hundred and fifty-six, and six he's got over there make—oh! it's seven, I see; one's tucked under. That's all right, then. Next denomination, Maung Than Byu."

I thought I had escaped, but was wrong. She would take no denial. "Why didn't you tell me you had thought better of it yesterday?" she demanded. "You said then——"

"I know, I know, I only made up my mind this morning," I explained, and, seeing trouble in her eyes, I babbled: "Quite late this morning," and saw my error too late.

"After you got my note, I suppose," she said with dangerous softness.

Whatever she thought, she expected—wanted me—to say "no," and, when I think how easily I might have prevaricated, I wonder why I was weak enough to tell the naked truth. "Well, yes, after that," I murmured, and hoped for the best.

She was very reflective, "Ah!" she said, and again "Ah!" and then "Please go on with your—your stock-taking. I shall not interrupt again."

And, positively, she almost kept her word. Only twice was she goaded to utterance. "Absurd having stamps all the same colour!" was what escaped her first, and this naturally led up a minute later to "And such a colour!" but I give you my word that these were the only comments she allowed herself till the books were signed and the treasury grating slammed and locked behind us.

We walked side by side away from the treasure vault. The treasure guard saluted. Happily they

were Sikhs, without a glimmer of humour. I cast a last envious glance at old Than Byu shaking out his waistcloth and being handed his neglected cheroot. I knew I was "in for it," and waited for her to begin, but she reserved her fire, and it was not till we were half way down the slope and well clear of the court house rabble that she spoke.

"One would think you had taken your leave on purpose to avoid me," she began, looking straight in front of her.

"Oh, come!" I remonstrated glibly, having had time to prepare for the attack. "If a man mayn't take the leave he has applied for and been gazetted to, I should like to know——"

"Has it been gazetted?" she interrupted.

"You may take my word for it." I assured her, earnestly. "It will be in the Rangoon papers by now."

"Yes, but, my dear man, you're not going to spend it here, surely?" she ejaculated.

"Here? of course not!" I returned. "I haven't settled yet where I'm going. It may be Penang. It may be Darjiling, but I'm going to get away from here to-morrow, at any rate."

"To-morrow!" she cried. "To-morrow! You don't seem to realize, Mr. Chepstowe, that the others won't be back from Mindaung for a week. Am I to spend the whole of that week here by myself? Do you imagine I should have let the others go if I had thought you would not be in the place to look after me?"

"I can't always be in the station," I returned sullenly. "I've got to go out sometimes."

She slackened her pace in order to give me a side glance from under her hat. "One would positively think you were frightened of me!" she ejaculated.

I thought of the prim bachelor horror of the morning hour. "And suppose I were," something prompted me to say.

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" she cried. "In any case that's no earthly reason why you should leave a lady in the lurch. I'm sure most men would have been flattered by what I did."

"Flattered!" I cried. "I don't understand."

"I don't suppose you do," she retorted. "Or you wouldn't have as good as insulted me by trying to bolt the minute—the very minute—you saw what I wanted."

"Well, and what do you want?" said I.

"Oh, I've no patience with you!" she cried. "What should I want but what any unprotected female in a strange land would want. Really, Mr. Chepstowe, the extraordinary ideas you have!"

She gave me plenty of time to realize myself how extraordinary they were, for she took me down the hill, past the low thatched dispensary and the corrugated iron bazaar and along the stifling village street without a word. She had no eyes for anything we passed. A prosperous householder was giving an entertainment in one of the compounds we skirted. There was the clash and squeal of a band behind the bamboo fence. Gay hangings beneath a dark jack tree enclosed a space spread with cane mats, where the meritorious burgess's gifts to the monastery were on view; platters piled with cocoa-nuts, candles and cakes, a wire gauze meat cover, a

gimcrack clock, a couple of hurricane lanterns. There was a press of guests in rose-pink and sulphur-yellow, plenty of florid paper decorations and much dissipated popping of lemonade bottles. Everything invited a digression, but she kept straight on through the hot evening air.

At last, near the police station, where the tamarinds opened out a little, she found her voice again. "It's too absurd for you to put on these airs," she cried. "I can't have you go to-morrow. It's nonsense! If I ask you as a favour to stop, you'll stop, I suppose."

"If it's put to me that way, of course I will," I growled. "But if I do, it won't be very pleasant for either of us. Our relations are likely to be a bit strained."

"Strained!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were afraid of their being the other way too much! Good heavens, if you look at it that way, you'd better go!"

"Very well, I won't stop," I muttered. "I'll go to-morrow. There's an end of it!"

We had halted for a few moments to relieve ourselves of the above. The delivery of my ultimatum seemed to start us walking again.

A minute later she opened upon me afresh. "I wish you would tell me what you're frightened of," she sighed. "If you and I aren't able to look after ourselves, I should like to know who is."

"I never said I was frightened," I exclaimed sheepishly. I was beginning to see my way out. "Look here," I went on. "I told you I was going to-morrow, and so I am. I'm going to Mindaung."

"To Mindaung?" she echoed. There was a new sound in her voice. "I believe you intended going to Mindaung all the time," she said.

I faced her quickly. "Why should I have wanted to go to Mindaung particularly?" I demanded.

She was quite ready with her retort. "Why did that Hanbury boy want to go to Mindaung particularly?" she asked.

She looked full at me, and, as I returned her look, I seemed to see again the brace of cheery riders I had watched vanishing over the ridge that very morning ahead of the sedate Mr. Cavisham. Everything became a little clearer; I began to see one, at any rate, of the reasons why Mrs. Cavisham had stopped behind.

"Hanbury had no idea you weren't going when he settled to go," said I.

"My staying behind made no difference to him," she said quickly.

"If you think that my reason for wanting to go to Mindaung had anything to do with Miss——" I began—and stopped.

"It wouldn't very much matter if it had," she said. "You've realized that yourself, I expect by now."

By this time we were stationary again. I found myself facing her, rubbing my chin, with all my doubts and hesitancies crystallizing, in the clear light of her eyes, into a final resolve, sudden and freakish. "I'm going to Mindaung to-morrow." I said, "And I'm going because you're going there too. You're going there with me!"

"Never!" she cried. "Nothing will drag me there!"

"Come now," I cried. "Isn't it what you suggested the other day yourself?"

"Exactly. And wasn't it what you yourself said was impossible?" she retorted.

"I may have," I admitted. "But it's possible now. I've changed my mind, that's all, and you've got to change yours."

She laughed outright. "Got to! I like that. Why, even if I changed my mind, you wouldn't come with me. You're frightened of me."

The way she harped on this string stirred my wrath. "What makes you go on about my being frightened?" I cried, exasperated.

She continued to vent her merriment on me. "You are! You are!" she assured me, hilariously.

"I don't see that there is anything funny about it," I growled, and she grew serious in a moment.

"Funny!" she echoed. "Heaven forbid! Oh, the comfort of it!"

CHAPTER IX

HER last words to me that evening had been "It's no use!" and I had called back to her from the bottom of the rest house steps, on my way back to my own bungalow, "I'm going to send the cart round in the morning all the same." We had left it at that, and at that it had hung all the time I was taking counsel with Than Byu about the loan of his very special conveyance and with my servants about provender for the journey. This was all after dinner. My carts left eventually at midnight, with orders to halt at Paukbin, and I went to bed calling myself a fool for having been sanguine enough to provide food for two.

The palms were grey in the mist when I rode to the rest house the next morning, prepared for a final tussle. I had expected objections and had come stiff-necked, primed with terrible pictures of what would happen if she stopped behind. I had expected interminable delay and had fortified myself to go through with hours of it. What I had not in the least expected was a scolding for arriving late. She made a great deal of its being the second occasion on which I had failed to be up to time. Once she could have forgiven, but to oversleep myself two mornings running was unpardonable! She chose to look upon me as a hopeless sluggard.

"The cart was here ages ago," she informed me, from where she sat, in a wonderful riding habit, with her elbows on the verandah rail. "Another five minutes and I should have started without you!"

I knew better than to suggest that I might have lingered in doubt as to whether she was not going to act up to her last night's unqualified refusal to accompany me. I was too pleased to find my path smoothed.

"If you only knew the bother I've had to get the *bandobast* made in time," was all I could find to say.

I might as profitably have commented on the weather! My lateness was an enormity to which she allowed herself to revert more than once during the half-hour it took to spread the mattress in the cart, to complete the packing of her last two dressing bags; to bestow her scent, her fan, her biscuits, her cushions and her books in their appointed places and to sign the rest house register. It was the last thing she referred to before she committed herself to the depths of her equipage.

"You can't grumble now if I'm a little behind tomorrow," she threw back at me as she disappeared under the yellow cover and let the hangings drop behind her.

I saw no more of her till we were over a league from Padu.

We cleared the outlying houses of the village and a deserted toddy drawer's camp of palm leaf hovels, and struck into a well-worn cart track in the lee of an outlying grey pagoda. In front of us the country rose and fell in leisurely undulations, mantled in a

sunlit garment of sober-coloured scrub jungle. Here and there the road, and here and there the sandy bed of a stream, flecked the landscape with streaks of reddish buff. In the nearer south lay a long jagged sandstone ridge covered with dry forest growth. Mindaung itself, still shrouded in the vapours of the dawn, was reserving itself for a clearer hour. All along the road's edge ran patches of cultivation, separated field from field by thin thorn hedges. The feathery millet was more than man high, every blade of it silvered with the drops of the morning. The sesamum and the cotton were in bloom, and in the dips and greener hollows, where the toddy palms towered, were a few emerald patches of rice land. As we topped the ridge by the shrine, a village lifted into sight, nestling in a depression two miles or so ahead, betrayed by its massed trees and white pagoda pinnacles. There was no sign of life inside the cart, no movement and no sound. I was evidently still in disgrace. I put spurs to my pony and made down the ribbon of road towards the distant landmark.

I drew rein at the village gate and by the village well I rested till the cart with its yellow tilt creaked up to me again, the oxen jingling merrily. Kyaukse, I remember the name of the village was, and the headman one Maung Sa, a lean brown rascal, with an eye for a pony and an uncanonical taste for the slaughter of small game. For the sake of the gun licence I had once got him he insisted on riding with me, at the head of a small mounted following, to the confines of his jurisdiction. It was the sight of this sportsman, with black tresses streaming,

perched, big toe in stirrup, on the back of a fidgety skewbald, that first drew Mrs. Cavisham's head from behind the curtain shrouding the rear end of the cart. His scarlet tasselled trappings pleased her, and she insisted on falling in with his suggestion of a short cut, which was to save us a tedious detour of a couple of miles. This, if you please, entailed the crossing first of a piece of open ploughed country and next of a deep cut water-course. My lady's driver thought scorn of the approaches to the stream and sent his cart rocking and squealing down the near bank, across the hot white sandy bed and up the further slope, as though he had nothing more breakable than a load of paddy bouncing at his back. She survived the up and down by some means, but she had something to say, through me, to every one concerned in bringing her to and taking her across the obstacle. It was my office to temper her reproof while transmitting it, which is the reason why Maung Sa never knew that he had forfeited his gun licence nor the driver that he had been fined a month's pay. Even Hanbury came in for his share.

"Springs!" I heard her ejaculate (she never fairly emerged from her retirement the whole time), and after an impressive interval "Springs!" again. "He said I could lie and read all day!" So much I caught as my pony paced alongside the near wheel.

"Are you there, Mr. Chepstowe?" she cried, presently.

"Yes," I returned, half afraid she was going to order me to turn about and escort her back to Padu.

"Yes, it's all right. You won't have any more like that."

"Go away!" was all she said. "I'm changing my habit."

I was rather nervous as to how matters were going to shape at our first halting place, Paukbin, where we were to breakfast. The squat drab bungalow was well outside the village and looked forlorn and uninviting over the spikes of its dingy bamboo palisade. The midday sun beat fiercely down upon an almost deserted compound. The only animate object visible was a black pariah dog which scratched its ribs near the foot of the wooden steps and scrambled to its feet to bark at us. But with the wheeze of the cart as it lumbered in between the gate-posts there was a springing to life, just as though the swarthy Daniel, who materialized in spotless white in the verandah, had waved a magician's wand. There was a whinny of greeting from the stable, out of which emerged a syce with bucket and brush; brown, high-girt figures began to sway across the compound, at all angles, under the burden of steaming kerosene oil tins. By the cook house, in a gust of grateful emanations, stood the cook, saucepan in hand, shading his eyes to take a count of the mouths of the party. The Burman rest house caretaker crept from behind him, wiping his lips, threw a clod or two at the inhospitable cur and knelt in the shade to know our behests.

I helped Mrs. Cavisham out of the cart. She was famished, she said, but, before anything, insisted on a bath. The ayah had already got her cue from Daniel. "Bath ready now, ma'am," she cried, scrambling from her seat beside the driver and

stimulating the carriers of the water tins in piercing Tamil, and I saw we were beginning famously. Mrs. Cavisham gave me a grateful look. Not thus would she have arrived at a strange staging bungalow with her husband. Ten minutes later I heard her splashing in her corner of the mat building while I was shaving in mine.

I don't know when we had our breakfast. She splashed on long after I was ready, but the meal, when it came, was a great success. I had eliminated brain cutlets from the menu ; the chops for once were very mutton, and somehow Daniel had managed to get hold of some teal, the first of the season. He had also picked some gardenias, which garnished a tumbler in the centre of the table, atoning for the coarseness of my bachelor linen. Ambrosial from her bath, with her hair clubbed in some mysteriously juvenile fashion at the back of her head, she faced me over the white blossoms, herself in white, on the bank of crimson cushions they had piled her chair with. She was as feline as ever, but she was the kitten now, rather than the full grown cat ; a blue ribbon round the neck would have been all appropriate. She enjoyed her claret and would have liked a cigarette with her coffee ; but I had nothing with me but a pipe and a few Burma cheroots and was inclined to be discouraging. " Does Mr. Cavisham allow you to smoke ? " I enquired.

" Allow me ! " She treated it like the excellent joke it was. If she chose to smoke there should be none to gainsay her. Indeed, she seemed to look upon it as a grievance that she should be deprived of her cigarette to-day. She spoke as though she seldom denied herself.

"If you smoked regularly, you would have your own cigarettes," I observed.

I thought I had cornered her, but she extricated herself with true kittenish nimbleness. "I've got to think of the child," she said.

"The child!" I repeated; and, when it dawned upon me that it was Miss Cavisham that she meant; I chuckled aloud. "Oh, *that* child!" I cried.

She had all a cat's distaste for being laughed at. "Well, Meg is a child!" she exclaimed. "She hadn't her hair up when I married her father."

"And how long ago was that?" I ventured to enquire.

"Eighteen months," she said, and, when I laughed again. "You may not think it," she said, "but I'm nearly seven years older than she is."

"Indeed," I said, not knowing what else to say. "You don't look it." And this was true enough. In her light wrap, with her baby coiffure and her portentous "seven years," my companion might have passed for the twin sister of the young person we were talking about.

"Well, why should I always try to look it?" she demanded.

"Do you ever try to look it?" I enquired.

Her hand wandered out to the gardenias in front of her, she took one and pensively stripped it of its leaves. "Mr. Chepstowe," she said, presently. "Never marry anyone who has got children--grown up children."

"Mrs. Cavisham, you may trust me with the widows," I replied solemnly.

She went on demolishing the gardenia. The image of juvenility had passed from her face. In the twinkling of an eye she had become the velvety mature tabby again.

Half an hour later we resumed the road.

I had an uncomfortable feeling that, till the next stage was reached, she might at any moment insist on turning back. We covered the ground finely and I saw no more of her till sundown, when she got off the cart and walked with me the last mile into Ywathit, our halting place for the night. During the afternoon Mindaung had been rising steadily higher, and now brooded gigantic over the bare stretches in the east, with its hollows all violet and indigo and its buttressed shoulders set to catch the pink of the sunset. Our bungalow stood near the dry bed of a watercourse in a grove of toddy palms. There was a police post here. A sententious Burman sub-inspector met us outside the village in uniform, and, though I pleaded my presence as a mere holiday maker, would spare me none of the particulars of the robbery he had just detected, and was proud to show Mrs. Cavisham his catch, a quartet of splotchy, coarse-haired ruffians, who were distending their unworthy skins with their evening rice under the eyes of a dapper sentry on the further side of the wooden bars of their cage. These desperados were, however, the only thrill that Ywathit could provide. The place was just a cluster of hovels, dropped, so to speak, among the thorn growth at the junction of two main cart tracks, with a tumble-down monastery and an

invisible monk, without a pagoda or a bazaar or an industry to call its own, and with hardly anything beyond the police station to show its visitors save the jungle clad flanks of the great mountain. The women trooping back in the dusk, with their water-pots, from the wells sunk in the sandy bed of the stream were all we had to look at till dinner was ready, and little enough food for conversation did they provide. It was good to hear the summons to eat from the immaculate Daniel, and better to stretch ourselves in long arm-chairs in the bare dark verandah after the meal, and watch the moon rise up from behind the blackness of Mindaung. My pipe tasted divine. I was at peace with the world, and flushed with a triumphant, post-prandial glow at the thought that, as good as against her will, I had conveyed this inexorable young person all the way from Padu to Ywathit; twenty-three miles by the P.W.D. milestones. If I had not earned my night's rest, who had?

I raised myself on my elbow to look at my companion. The moonlight had reached her face. Her dress was banded black with the shadows from the verandah rail.

"This is good," I said.

She murmured agreement, "Gorgeous! This is worth everything."

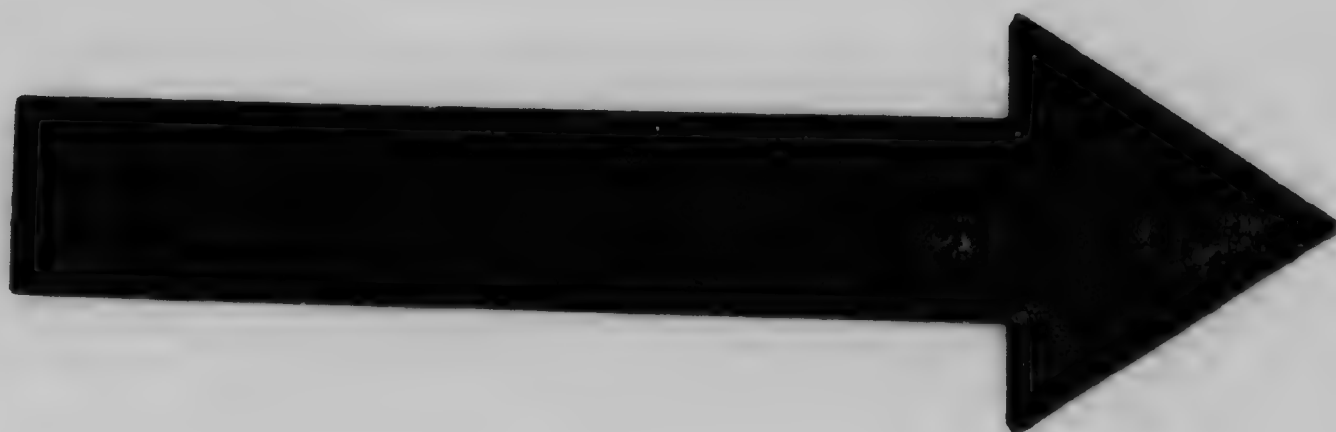
"Stiff?" I enquired.

"Stiff as a log," she told me. "But, bless you, I don't mind. It's worth it."

"Are you glad you came?" I went on.

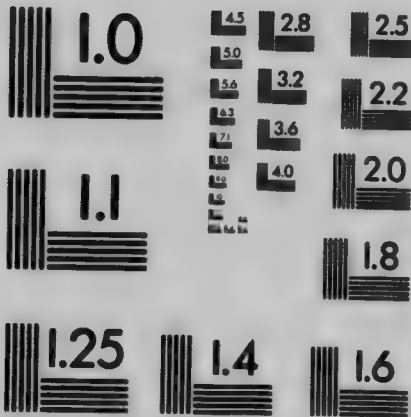
"Aren't you?" she asked.

I sent a laugh up into the air. "I never thought



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when I got up this morning that I could have dragged you as far as this by night time," I said.

She half turned her head to look at me. "Didn't you think I wanted to come to Mindaung?" she questioned softly.

"You were never keen on it," I said. "Lord! I could see that the first time I met you."

She stretched out her arms and yawned luxuriously. "And is there any earthly reason why I should be keen?" she asked. "I take no interest in tribes and see no reason why I should try to take any. Goodness! Can you imagine anything more appalling than it would have been if I had gone up with them. Matthew messing around with his measurements, pulling the dirty creatures about. Cephalic index, length of forearm, height standing, oh, the rubbish of it! Not giving a thought to anybody or anything else."

"Well, it isn't as though you would have been all alone with him," I observed.

"Oh, don't talk of the others!" she cried. "If Matthew had been taken up with his tribes, those two would have been taken up with one another. You should have seen them yesterday morning! Now you can see why I waited to get you to come up with me."

Her serene assurance in putting it thus tickled my after-dinner sense of humour delightfully. "'Waited! . . . Get you to come up with me!'" I repeated, sucking hard at my pipe, with my eyes on the palm tops. "That's good, that's very good."

She tapped my arm with her fan, and at the

moment I did not seem to mind. "I mean it," she said.

"Don't tell me you made *me* come!" I chuckled. "Confess, if I hadn't made you come (and a job it was, I tell you) you would have been still in Padu."

She tapped me again, harder this time. "You're quite mistaken," she said. "What a sceptical thing it is, to be sure."

I put down my pipe and sat bolt upright in my chair, with a sudden feeling that I had been brought, in all my bloated self-sufficiency, up against something stubborn and stabbing. "You never thought about coming to Mindaung till I spoke about it yesterday," I persisted.

"It was I who spoke about it first," she laughed. "Days ago." By the sound of her one would have taken her to be as pleased as Punch at the outcome of some sly manoeuvre of her own.

"You may have spoken about it first," I cried. "I'm not talking of days ago. I say that you had no idea of Mindaung yesterday till I suggested it. Why, you literally pounced upon me when I first breathed the word!"

"Pounced! Did I?" she exclaimed. "Let me tell you that if I hadn't made you come, I should have come by myself. Why, my dear man, you talk exactly as though you had forced my hand and made *me* come up here with you."

"And that's pretty well exactly what I did," I retorted. "I say that you had no idea of coming to Mindaung when I first saw you yesterday evening."

"No idea!" she repeated scornfully. She was silent for a moment. Then she laughed and shrugged together. She had been upright beside me. Now she dropped back in her chair. "Well, you'll know to-morrow," she remarked.

"Know what?" I demanded.

"Know who made who come up," she replied. "Know that I only prevailed on Matthew to go without me by promising to get you to come up with me."

"Did you?" I growled. "Very enterprising, but, as it happened, it was exactly what I intended doing!"

"Oh, nonsense!" she cried. "How about Darjiling and Penang? You had no idea of Mindaung at first!"

"No more had you—at first," I faltered.

"I had had idea enough to risk a bet on the subject," she returned.

"A bet! What bet?" I asked.

"Ask Mr. Hanbury to-morrow," she said. "Ask him if I didn't tell him . . . well, it doesn't matter now. Ask him to tell you what I said about your coming up."

I rose to my feet, my post-prandial glow fanned to a fierce tingle. "Suppose I don't see Hanbury to-morrow," I said.

She in her turn almost sprang up. "What! You're not going on any further!" she cried. "You're going back to Padu?"

"If I say 'yes,' you'll be talking about defenceless females again, I suppose," I grumbled.

For one moment she flared up. "Oh, you can

go back by yourself if you like!" she cried. "I shall have brought you as far as this, anyway." Then all at once and without warning she softened in a startling way. "What's the good of being foolish and cross about it?" she pleaded. "I wasn't quite sure about being able to get you to come. How could I? We had a box of chocolates on it, he and I (as though we could ever get chocolates in this hole!), but, till you came out with it yesterday, I thought I was going to lose; honestly I did. It was just a chance I didn't."

"By Jove, it was!" I growled. I pulled fiercely at my pipe for a while, marvelling that I should have been so cock-a-hoop a few minutes back; then I turned for the head of the verandah steps. "If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Cavisham," I said "I'll see about the carts for to-morrow. I expect by the time I've finished, you'll have gone to bed. Good night."

"Can't we be friends to-night?" was all she said. "Just for to-night anyway."

I was half way down the steps before I spoke again. "You'd better go to bed, Mrs. Cavisham," I said. "You must be dead tired, and, remember, we've got our work cut out for us to-morrow."

She did not reply, but I heard her call the ayah.

For a good half hour after I had arranged about the carts, I strode fuming up and down in the moonlight in front of the bungalow. The servants' chatter in the direction of the stables died away. The night breeze sang drowsily in the palm tops. The night birds were abroad. The light in her

room burnt on. About ten o'clock a figure darkened her window. "Good night!" she called to me as I reached the point of my beat that was nearest the building. I called back "Good night!" and strode on unappeased. Next time I touched the same point a voice came "Are you feeling better?" I did not reply. The third time there was neither figure nor voice. Then the light went out.

In another quarter of an hour I was really feeling better. The moon and the lullaby of the breeze had done me good. My sentry go had smoothed my ruffled feelings. It *was* just chance (as she had said) that I had happened to fall in with her designs. Let her have her little crow! I stepped softly up into the verandah. On the way to my bedroom I halted outside hers.

"Look here," I called out gently, "if you ever do get that box of chocolates, I shall jolly well claim half."

There was no answer. I suppose she was asleep.

CHAPTER X

REFLECTED in his camp mirror, crinkled in the spasms of shaving, Hanbury's roseate face of gloom was the outstanding feature in the picture left on my mind of our arrival at Mindaungmyo next day. My recollection is that, though we were before our time, our coming caused mighty little stir. Miss Cavisham was dressing for breakfast when our carts creaked up to the rest house under a triumphal arch of bamboo trellis-work and plantain stems, and could only emit faint cries of welcome from behind closed matting doors. Mr Cavisham was out in the village, measuring. That I should be Mrs. Cavisham's escort was, to Hanbury, plying his razor near the tent door, as much a matter of course as that morning's sunrise. The despondent youth did not suggest by so much as a semitone that he had ever thought of hazarding a farthing on the possibility of my escaping from Mrs. Cavisham's toils. "We didn't expect you till to-morrow. You must have hustled!" he threw back at me over his shoulder, turning a cheek that shone irrepressibly pink over the white of a chinful of lather. He and I were sharing the tent in the rest house compound while the Cavishams occupied the bungalow itself. My half of the space inside the canvas walls as

bare, and obviously reserved for my belongings. The surprise would have been if I had not come. At the same time he spoke as though, with Mrs. Cavisham to escort, he himself would have drawn out linked sweetness and taken it easy.

"Oh, I always meant to hustle," I said. "Had a good time?"

"Splendid!" he replied deliberately. However, I saw no relic of the splendour on his features when he had shorn away his mask of soap. He was woebegone, in a mitigated, rubicund manner, it is true, but still woebegone, and I wondered how far Miss Cavisham was responsible for his dejection and whether the cloud would have been as deep if I had kept away. He looked very much as he might have if he had proposed and been rejected, and really the young lady's face was so much a counterpart of the young gentleman's, that I thought that must be the particular catastrophe. Mr. Cavisham bustled in late from the village, telling us—very superfluously, it would seem—not to wait for him, and we sat down to breakfast, a very dull quartet. Mrs. Cavisham I had only seen for a few seconds early that morning at Ywathit, before she vanished into the cart. She had had her early tea in the seclusion of her bedroom, had given me a short "good morning" and nothing more, and now accounted for her silence and her lack of appetite by a headache. Nothing was to be hoped for from the young people, and it was left to Mr. Cavisham, when he arrived, to ease the conversational gear. Signs were not wanting that his wife had been posting the genial transparent soul up to date.

He emerged from his room in his clean suit of Assam silk, primed to the bursting point, the image of amiable fatuity.

"Ah, this is excellent!" he protested, as he greeted me. "Most good of you, Mr. Chepstowe, to forego a trip to Calcutta (or Singapore, was it?) to spend your holiday here. My wife, I gather, was misinformed about your movements. She thought, for some reason, that you meant to cancel your leave and come up on duty here by easy stages, and so, as she fancied a more leisurely pace than these two impetuous young persons (he beamed impartially on the glum pair who sat to his right and left), she waited behind with the ayah—with the ayah, yes, I insisted on that—reckoning on your kindness to see her through and escort her. And all the time she was mistaken. You have indeed been kind. Well, it must be our duty to prevent your regretting your change of plans. I don't know what we should have done if you had had to go to Darjiling after all. But what you have lost by it we certainly have gained."

Thus it had been ordained by Mrs. Cavisham that the situation should be officially summed up, and thus I was content to leave it. I could certainly not have improved on the authorized version. "Most happy to have done what I could," I murmured. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy myself thoroughly here!" But he was not finished yet.

"And the energy with which you have begun your holiday," he cried. "We did not expect to see you till to-morrow night at earliest, and behold,

here you are already! Your zeal must have been infectious. Barely fourteen hours after us. You must have flown! I assure you, Mr. Chepstowe, you have done what I should never have been able to do."

He cocked his eyebrows genially at his wife. Mrs. Cavisham remained cold. "And is there anything very surprising about that, Matthew?" she asked drily, and I perceived that the dear good man had already begun to outstrip his instructions.

"I've no doubt Mrs. Cavisham hurried in order to get back to you, Mr. Cavisham," I assured him with a grin.

"Back to the nest! Ha ha! I hope so, I'm sure," he laughed. "Excellent! My love——"

"I wish you would begin your breakfast," said his love. "Who is cooking for us? Our cook or Mr. Hanbury's?"

"The man we got in Mandalay, my dear," said Mr. Cavisham.

"I thought as much," she observed. "These scrambled eggs are a disgrace."

"I will speak to him," promised her husband. "You have never complained before, Isabel."

"I hadn't tasted Mr. Chepstowe's man's cooking before," she rejoined.

I looked up from my plate. "What? my man?" I said. "Oh, he can cook when he's sober. I don't find anything wrong with these eggs. Have you had a good morning's work, Mr. Cavisham?"

"A beginning," he replied, helping himself to the condemned dish. "A satisfactory beginning."

Your clerk was very useful, Hanbury. A most conscientious translator. The local type is interesting, though there seems a strange dislike among the people to admit the existence of any Chin admixture. By the way, Mr. Chepstowe, have you ever heard of snake worship among the Chins?"

"Snake worship? Never," I returned. "Nor among the Burmans either, for the matter of that."

"I ask," he said "because I am told that there are some village snake charmers here. Now I understand that, compared with India, there are very few indigenous snake charmers in Burma."

"That is so," I said. "All the snake charmers I have seen have been natives of India. I have been told about these local men, though."

"Women," he observed. "At least a woman."

"Yes, now that you mention it, I've heard of her," I said.

"Well, my point is this," he went on. "A woman, you will admit, no doubt, is very exceptional. Now, can she be accounted for, I ask you, by the presence here in the past of Chins? Can we, in fact, see in her a survival from the days when snake worship was still the religion of the more backward sections of the community? I am deeply interested in the whole question of ophiolatry. The subject is a most enthralling one, and the discovery of this woman immediately suggested to me the possible existence, on the slopes of this remote volcano, of the remains of a female hierarchy, reminiscent, perhaps of the—of the—"

"Oh, do eat your breakfast, Matthew," said his

wife. He caught her eye and stopped. His jaw dropped despondently, but he fastened a mute look upon me, filling his mouth obediently with egg. I carried the regard on to Hanbury. We gazed at each other without a word, but our mouths must have indicated a frank scepticism. Mr. Cavisham drooped visibly.

"Far-fetched, perhaps," he ventured, with something like a groan.

"Well," I felt bound to confess, "it would be precious hard to make out a case for a female priesthood in this country, even among the Chins."

"More likely to eat 'em than to worship 'em," murmured Hanbury, for the first time rousing himself from his ponderings to speech.

My words seemed to have depressed Mr. Cavisham to the dust. Hanbury's, to my surprise, stimulated him momentarily.

"Eat them? Ah, sacramentally, perhaps?" he cried. "Do you honestly think that we could postulate any inwardness of that kind?"

"I should very much doubt it," I said, and Hanbury grunted corroboration. "Dirty eaters, those Karens," he went on thoughtfully. "Saw something of them in the police. Watched two beggars once spend half a day smoking a lizard out of a hole in a tree for their supper. Nearly set the camp on fire, they did. Rats, mice, rotten eggs, all the same to them. Chins every bit as bad. Precious little sacramental there, I should say. Give it up, Mr. Cavisham, give it up."

And the gentleman adjured, feeling that we were

all against him, did give it up, and asked for the marmalade.

With arms on the verandah rail after the meal, I looked over the encompassing fence towards the flank of the mountain, billow after billow of brown forest and green plantain groves almost up to the summit. From this side nothing of the old crater was visible save the outermost rocks. The hollow, full now of dense woodland, faced east. On our western face the tapering shoulders ran up for the last thousand feet to the highest crags covered with close herbage that suggested a stretch of Alpine pastureland. The cap of cloud lingered aloft in the shape of a few feathery flecks, but for all its length the ragged line of the topmost ridge was clear cut against the sky.

There was an unaccustomed freshness in the air, for the rest house was well up the slope; dandled, as it were, on the knees of the mother mountain. The plain spread, hot and hazy below us, seen through a dip in the plateau's edge. The dry watercourses sprawled drab over the grey blue. The great river just showed in the offing, and the Chin Hills beyond it seemed to have risen as we rose, emulous of our nearer peak. Over my shoulder the dark-leaved banyans half hid a gilt and white pagoda and a spindle-topped red-brown monastery roof. A few thatched huts peered out from among the neighbouring plantain trees near where the village palisade approached the bungalow. From one of them came the rhythmic crunch! crunch! crunch! of a loom, alternating with the dull thump

of a paddy pounder. At the head of the ceremonial avenue of trellis-work and greenery with which Mindaung had chosen to welcome its distinguished guests there was a wavering sheen of silk. The village headman had come, with his hangers on, to pay his respects.

"Please ask him about the snake charmers," entreated Miss Cavisham, as I lent forward to catch the local functionary's eye.

Our man, a heavily built Burman, shuffled up slowly, with a tray of oranges. He had brought some beads to show us, dug up out of the Chin barrows, agate and cornelian, and a black stone that none of us could identify, and there was nothing about the snake charmers that he could not tell us. They lived at Pyogaung, a neighbouring village, a few miles along the slope, but he pledged himself to see that they came for a performance at the rest house within twenty-four hours. To that end an attendant whipped his flaming cloth between his tattooed shanks and ran. There was only one woman, the headman said. There had been two sisters, Ma Kin and Ma Nyut, but Ma Nyut, foolish thing, had allowed herself to be bitten by one of her snakes two months before and had succumbed to the venom. The headman referred to the accident with an apologetic smile, and his followers, cocking their headcloths behind him, did not attempt to smother their guffaws. It was a twelve foot hamadryad that had done her business for the lady of Pyogaung. The headman elbowed off the length in cubits for our better understanding on the verandah floor. There were four of that size altogether.

"What! And the other woman is still performing?" cried Miss Cavisham, when the cause of mirth had been translated to her.

"It's their bread and butter, I suppose," I observed.

She thought it "horrid!" "I don't think I can bear to see them," she assured me. "Is it frightfully dangerous?"

"Not ordinarily, I imagine," I said. "They have been at it for years, apparently, without anything happening."

"I shall shut my eyes the whole time," she declared.

"Don't talk nonsense, Meg!" cried Mrs. Cavisham from the long arm-chair on which she was showing her ankles. "The fangs can't have been properly drawn. You may be sure they'll be doubly careful now. I should like to see how it's done. I'll get the woman to show me. I believe I could easily do that sort of thing myself. Don't you think so, Mr. Hanbury?"

"Tut, tut!" expostulated Mr. Cavisham, pen in mouth, from behind a sheaf of papers.

Hanbury, coming up the steps from the tent, said, "Don't you try and do anything foolish, Mrs. Cavisham. Look here, is this the book you want?"

"My dear man! didn't I say a *red* cover?" she cried. "I know I slipped it into your bag the last thing."

He seemed to be fetching her books most of the forenoon. Not once did he address a word to Miss Cavisham. Mrs. Cavisham treated me to a similar reticence. As Miss Cavisham was copying measure-

ments for her father till tea-time, I felt that very little was being done to carry out Mr. Cavisham's undertaking that my holiday should be made pleasant for me. But after all, I was not the first person who has made the discovery that five can be just as much no company as three.

CHAPTER XI

I SHOULD be sorry to say how early the next morning the snake charmers arrived on the scene, or what following they brought with them. Mindaungmyo, behind its screen of bamboo and plantain, had been humming with visitors from chota haziri onwards, and I, for one, had my early morning tea at six o'clock. Before eight the village was vocal with brass and reed and drumskin, and we heard the whine and clash of at least one dress rehearsal in progress on the further side of the fence before we sat down to breakfast. Through that meal I had glimpses of the spectators, hushed by our august proximity, filing through the further gate of the rest house compound to where, under the biggest of the tamarinds, a space had been cleared of carts and the stage had been set. The good folk were all assembled when we came down after breakfast: half of Pyogaung I might hazard, and a good three-fourths of Mindaungmyo expectant on its haunches, as much interested in the foreign ladies as in the serpents. There were five long arm-chairs for us at the foot of the steps, and between our seats and the semi-circle of squatting villagers the ground was laid with gaudy mats, an aniline flood of emerald-green and orange

and pink. In the centre of this spread stood four ominous big baskets covered with red, white and black cloth. The performers sat in the front row of the watching throng. Beside the charmers proper there were several musicians and a few local comedians to give the lighter touch. They were giving us a full bill.

We took our seats amid the boom and clatter of the band. The headman knelt at my elbow, his wife and daughters crept, with the village watching them enviously, on to a mat at Mrs. Cavisham's immediate right. The performers grovelled in a profound obeisance, the overture faded away with a dying squeal, and two clowns, in the scantiest of waistcloths, led off with a humorous dialogue.

Miss Cavisham leant over towards me. "Which is Ma Kin?" she asked.

"The one with the yellow head-cloth on," I said.

"What, not that thing with the powdered face!" she whispered. "She looks like a man. I thought she was one."

To tell the truth, I had mistaken her for one myself at first, for she had a foppish kerchief twisted round her black hair and a man's waist-cloth girt high and bunched over a pair of black Chinese trousers. Her flat figure under its white jacket told nothing. It was her hands and face alone that gave her true sex; tapering, lissom palms, a thin, winning, haggard face daubed with yellow *thanakka* powder, a frame for tired roving black eyes. With her knees to her chin she sat before us, tugging with nervous fingers at a corner of one of

the mats, while from time to time she threw a shrill sally or two into the ribald colloquy that the jesters were holding their audience with. It was the usual low-class twaddle. The crowd jeered mirthfully at intervals, and over my shoulder I could feel the headman eyeing me askance to see how much we understood and were going to put up with. In a minute or two, however, the woman signed to one of the comic men to take the lid off one of the baskets. He approached with exaggerated caution and mock terror, only to fly, with a burlesque leap, back to his original ground at a shouted word of warning from his male companion as soon as he had removed the covering of coloured cloth. The audience shook with laughter, and the jester jigged up and down with sham anxiety as the woman herself moved across to the basket and squatted in front of it.

She lifted the lid and placed it on the ground beside her. She tapped the outside of the basket, but there was no sign of life from within. She tapped it again, then, with a quick motion, she flicked her hand inside and out again, and, as though released by a spring, a great flat head darted up, alert and swaying. Miss Cavisham gripped her father by the knee. The orchestra sprang to life again.

Twelve feet long the hamadryad was reputed to be, and a full twelve feet it looked when it had slid smoothly out of its shelter and faced the charmer. All the outward and visible marks of the cobra were there: the flat hood, the death's head marking, the disdainful swan-like carriage. Yellower than

a cobra, it was the largest venomous snake I had ever seen.

It swung irresolutely before her, and then, with a half turn, tried to glide away. In a twinkling her thin fingers had gripped it by the tail, and she had pulled it back to face her, erect, with its black tongue flickering. On her heels, the oval of her face was on a level with its hood. With hands and knees apart, and twisting wrists, she shuffled in front of it, now to one side, now to the other, while the music quickened and the beast made darts at the dancing figure, striking, however, downwards each time, so that only the well protected region round the waist was reached. At every relaxation of effort the woman stirred the reptile up again, slapping its ringed coils as they spread over the mats, and lashed it to fury and open jaws. It struck and struck again, though never reaching where it could wound, and, after a while, she stopped goading and began to woo it.

The music dwindled to a monotonous drone. The snake dropped to a steady rhythmical swaying, its gaze fixed on its late tormentor. It followed her every motion. The woman shifted nearer on her bare heels; crouched, poised, for a few moments, and came closer still; bent, craned forward, and brought her thin set face opposite the curved hood. The great beast pulsated, its eye-slits, behind its little sneering nostrils, tense and vigilant.

"If it strikes now, she's done for!" I heard Hanbury observe, just as though he had made a great discovery.

The two heads came closer still together, almost

touching. The woman blew in the animal's scaly face; once, again, and yet a third time; leant even further forward and put her mouth against the snake's; rubbed its grinning lips with hers, protruded a red tongue and licked the beast's muzzle.

Mrs. Cavisham's voice sounded clear over the drowsy burden of the pipe. "I should like to be able to do that," she said.

Miss Cavisham murmured nothing but "How very disgusting!" For a moment I wished she had fulfilled her intention of keeping her eyes shut all through the performance.

The two heads drew apart again. The snake still followed the performer with its little eyes. She sat on, facing it, barely moving, smiling inscrutably. She had it well in hand. Then a short, thick-set man in Chinese trousers who had been working a clapper in the orchestra, stepped out, came behind the monster and, with a quick movement, caught it by the neck. A second man ran to his assistance and the pair of them thrust the struggling reptile back into its basket.

The clowns gave her a breathing space, a low comedy turn, but only a short one. She was soon at it again. There was a snake in each of the baskets, and with each of the four the wan, seducing woman with the burning eyes went through the same performance; teasing, coaxing, dominating, each in turn—except the last, an enormous testy brute, more bilious yellow and sulky than the other three, and with a more open-mouthed, vicious method of attack. It had recently sloughed its skin, and there was still a flake hanging, beardlike,

from its chin as it undulated to the piping. It was far from lending itself to an intimate caress. I noticed that it was put very shortly through its paces and was handled with great circumspection when it was replaced in its basket. This was the one, the headman whispered to me, which had misbehaved itself with the late lamented sister. He knew the beast's name and mentioned it, Nagagyi.

I think we all breathed the easier in our chairs when the last lid had been thumped home and the troupe knelt for its final *shiko*. It was not till then that Hanbury felt himself free to explain to Mrs. Cavisham, with appropriate action, how easy, after all, when one bore the poor thing's limitations in mind, it was to avoid a cobra's stroke. I tried to engage Miss Cavisham with somewhat similar views of my own, but, though she gave me her eyes and voice, it was Hanbury who got her ears. Indeed, she was his most attentive listener, for Mrs. Cavisham, in her turn, was centred in the snake woman, who squatted, hot and panting, after her efforts, while Mr. Cavisham circled amiably above her, proffering silver, and, with the assistance of Hanbury's clerk, drawing her and her companions out. Progress in this quarter was rapid, for presently an ejaculation from Mrs. Cavisham made me look up, to see Mr. Cavisham with Ma Kin's hand in his, to all appearances trying to wrench it from her wrist.

"Showing her the tourniquet trick," suggested Hanbury quickly, anxious to recall his companion to the weightier business of his own theories, but Mrs. Cavisham thought she knew better.

"Whatever are you up to there, Matthew?" she cried.

"Nothing, my love, nothing," her husband assured her, peering backwards with his moustache on his shoulder. "Only a physiological test."

"A physiological test!" repeated she dryly "Come here!" and he drifted towards her.

"Merely seeing how close she can bring the back of her fingers to her forearm," he explained, grasping his own palm in illustration. "They really are wonderfully flexible, these Burmans! Do you remember that woman in Mandalay, my dear?"

Mrs. Cavisham had no desire to be reminded of the woman in Mandalay. "I don't think the creature had a bone in her body!" she exclaimed, and added severely, "I object altogether to these anatomical exhibitions. Tell her to show me some of the snake's fangs."

The snake woman was called up to her, and for a moment the two faced each other. The Burman crouched on the mats, pale, breathless and bright-eyed, fanning herself with a cloth, facing the company with a shaky smile. The Englishwoman sleek and flushed and shapely, sat forward in her chair with her elbows on her knees and her face propped on her fingers. Their eyes met with a throb of half-felt antagonism. Mrs. Cavisham made a half-hearted advance, but the snake woman, pleading fatigue, begged to be excused the further exhibition that was talked of. Her snakes were cross and needed humouring and food. She would bring them and show them off to-morrow.

"Very well," consented Mrs. Cavisham. "And tell her she has got to teach me how to charm them when she does bring them."

I translated the command, and the woman, hovering between consent and refusal, smiled, knelt to her farewell, and trailed off with the rest of the troupe.

All this time Miss Cavisham and Hanbury had been sitting speechless alongside of one another, each, to outward seeming, oblivious of the other's presence. Considering how interested the former had been in the young man's commentary on the art of snake catching, it struck me as strange that they had been able to find no common ground.

CHAPTER XII

IF I mistake not, Hanbury, temporarily repulsed, was rash enough to return to the attack the evening of that same day, in the moonlight with Miss Cavisham, after dinner. If he did, he was again discomfited, for early next morning he took his afflicted presence and his folding camp bed altogether away from Mindaungmyo, and was understood to have plunged deep into an investigation of his perennial cattle theft case at Ywathit. With our fifth gone, I looked for a reshuffle which would give me more of Mrs. Cavisham's society, but found that that lady, in an access of wifely devotion, had taken upon herself the duty of supervising the ethnographer's research work to the exclusion of all else! She never left the poor man's side the whole of that forenoon, and I take it that, whatever scientific ground was covered, no further physiological tests were indulged in. Miss Cavisham, in any case, fell to me to entertain, and, I must say that, in contemplating the arrangements for the day, her father showed me that there was compensation for his restrictions in the knowledge that now, at any rate, I was having things made really nice for me. In this view I was quite prepared to coincide, and certainly Miss Cavisham appeared to intend that

the niceness should be of quite a superlative quality. She seemed the brighter for Hanbury's absence, indulged in what I flattered myself were sundry sighs of relief, became pinker and more alert, and, when I suggested an excursion with her to the top of Mindaung, jumped at it as she might have jumped at a genuine treat and insisted on tea on the summit.

We left the student transcribing data in a corner of the verandah under the eye of a vigilant coadjutor, and, with a Burman villager to show us the way, headed for the heights.

A quarter of an hour up the first slope brought us to the storeyed shrines of the two guardian spirits of the mountain, the Brother and Sister *Nai*, whose dumpy wooden effigies could be seen gazing out plainwards over their withered floral tributes. As far as this point forest vegetation prevailed. Above it the path climbed through less pretentious brushwood. There were some fields of peas and millet on a bit of shelving ground further up, and then we reached the plantain belt, and toiled for a time with the view shut out by a flapping world of lustrous leafage. Higher still it was nearly all herbage and undergrowth. The track narrowed and grew steeper. We fought our way upwards through the grasses and flowering shrubs to a more open height, where the vegetation dwindled to a growth spreading coarse and tufted among the rocks, and a sharp zigzag carried us round the tip of a shoulder to show us the hillside rolling sea-green to the lip of the crater. We were over four thousand feet above the sea and there was nothing now between us and the plain at our feet. The last intervening bush had dropped down and

away. The thatched roofs of Mindaungmyo clustered, microscopically neat, among the tree-tops immediately below us. The Irrawaddy braided with silver a vast yellow-brown level, whose further edge rose up to meet and melt into the embrace of the grey Arakan highlands. Peak called to peak across the sallow plain. Imagination, overtopping the distant ranges, could almost conjure up visions of a shadowy coast line, dotted islands, and the Bay of Bengal, flat and white in the furthest west, all visible from points on the dim highlands before us.

We dropped on the grass to rest. It was early afternoon still, but already the air came fresh and compelling and my young lady's cheeks flew a fine carmine. She was a cheery little image. Nothing of the cat about *her*, but much of the faithful hound. The climb had tumbled her hair about her and made her pant like a young collie. I think I have spoken already of her trustful eyes. I began to notice self-reproaching depths in them that seemed to assure me how terribly she had had being unkind to Hanbury the evening before. And well she may have hated it. They were not meant for unkind glances, those eyes. What was at the top of my mind, I remember, was a feeling that I should have dearly liked to chase that look of remorse out of them. But what was the good of telling her that Hanbury was an ass, quite unworthy of her; I should have had to add that he was a dear good ass, and nothing would have been bettered. Of course, he was an ass. I had no doubt that he had been amazingly foolish, poor beggar! I felt, as I looked into those

eyes, that I might very easily have been a bit of an ass myself, had I not definitely renounced a certain class of earthly vanities . . .

And about this time I found myself enquiring how long it was since I had made this renunciation. How about my new freedom? I called to mind my simile of the enlarged anchorite, the picturesque gentleman who had been allowed, after a domestic cataclysm, to raise his eyes from the dust at his feet to gaze on womankind. I could have laughed to think of the use to which he had been putting those organs in the interval. How much of his time since had he spent in the society of an attractive young married lady? How much was he going to spend in that of an even younger lady, whose eyes were becoming a matter of absorbing interest to him? He was not doing badly for a recluse barely three days liberated!

I acknowledged the thrust with an inward grin. At the same time I did not try to leave off letting Miss Cavisham's remorse interest me. It was foolish of her to persist in her penance of self-reproach. Hanbury would get over it in time, just as I was getting over the *affaire* Meredith. Of course I was getting over it. (And here, if a moody spectral Hanbury seemed to thrust his head up for a moment to protest how easy the "getting over it" ought to be for me, I took care to ignore the interruption.) If I got over my *affaire*, Hanbury ought to get over his. And he would, too. There was no earthly need for her to focus her self-accusing gaze on the particular dark blotch in the mottling of the landscape below that I told her was Ywathit. The fact that our friend was gloomily examining police witnesses four

thousand feet below us in the neighbourhood of that dark blotch need not have weighed so on her mind. It did, however. My account of what Mrs. Cavisham and I had done at Ywathit two days before interested her but little. She wanted only to know if Hanbury had had any hand in the arrest of the robbers we had seen in custody there, and enquired how long the cattle theft investigation was likely to last.

Heaven forbid that I should give Hanbury away ! I opined that it would take precisely as long as the investigating officer chose to make it take.

She sat and hugged her knees and panted on for a while in silence. Her eyes wandered over the whole landscape, but her thoughts kept in a singularly narrow groove. "Is he looked upon as a good police officer?" she enquired at last.

"Why, yes, I believe so," said I.

"He's going to try and get into the Commission, you know," she went on.

I did not know, but I said "Ah!" as though I had half expected it. After all, I was not surprised. If Hanbury imagined that he was the first love-lorn policeman who had detected in the Burma Commission a painful but effective short cut to a competence for two, he was mistaken.

She let me absorb the intimation while she pulled at the bents by her side. "Is it easy to get into the Commission from the police?" she enquired, at last.

"Not as easy as it was when I got in," I replied.

She had just tugged out from somewhere a recalcitrant grass stem. She looked up at me with the

stalk half-way to her mouth. "Did *you* get in from the police?" she exclaimed.

"I did," I said. "But that was ten years ago."

She kept her gaze on me. "Ten years ago!" she repeated. Her tone of awe seemed to make the incident prehistoric. "I thought," she said a moment later, "that you were a—a civilian, a—what do they call them?" She looked up half quizzically in my face.

"A heaven-born?" I laughed. "No, I'm not a heaven-born. I shouldn't be a subdivisional officer at thirty-five if I were."

She echoed "thirty-five!" with a cheerful jump in her voice. I felt she was eyeing me to discover the marks of senility I had hitherto succeeded in hiding. Then she broke out with "Does Isabel know, and father?"

"What, that I'm thirty-five?" I asked.

"No, that you're not a civilian," she made answer.

I raised my eyebrows at her, "Mrs. Cavisham? Your father?" I returned. "I'm sure I don't know."

She was silent and I was moved to ask, "Why should they?"

"Oh, I don't know. Isabel thinks a lot of that sort of thing, you see," she said. She sat for some time nibbling reflectively at her piece of grass without removing her eyes from the dark spot that I had told her was Ywathit. I tried, in the silence that fell on us, to figure this latest development out. Every moment light was being let in, but it came patchily. It was quite a new idea that, if Hanbury

had really been sent about his business, the sending had been none of Miss Cavisham's, but, new or not, the thing had come to stay. Had our young friend, to use an Anglo-Indian idiom, actually been given his *jawab*, the *jawab* irrevocable? It looked as though he had not been left entirely without hope; witness the Commission, which was obviously presented as a loop-hole, a last resort. There was light on so much, but why the deuce, I asked myself, should it matter to Mr. or Mrs. Cavisham whether I was a "heaven-born" or not? Was it by any chance for this that I had been brought up to Mindaung? Was I to be played off against the ineligible Hanbury? Should I be used further now that it was known that I was nothing more than an ex-policeman myself? Where, in fine, did I come in? for it positively looked as though I was meant to come in somewhere. One thing was certain. I was resolved not to come in where I was expected to, if the expectation happened to be Mrs. Cavisham's. The whole business took on a sordid air. I was puzzled; and not a little disgusted, but not with Meg Cavisham.

When my companion had got her breath again, we moved on, and, mounting steadily as we skirted a saddle, with all the Irrawaddy valley under our right hand, won to the crowning knoll and looked out over the tree-tops in the crater on to new expanses, a fresh chess-board of dry jungle and flat cultivation with a low-lying, ragged mountain chain peering up over its rim in the east, the edge of the Shan plateau, the high-road to China.

Here was our goal. Here we relieved our guide

of the tea basket and made our tea, and here, with all Mindaung mountain shrunk to a paltry hummock of stone strewn turf and the better part of Upper Burma spread below us, I began to find that in this rare heady air my fancy was soaring to unwonted heights. The scene recalled a particular rugged stretch of hill on the Italian Riviera ; heather and pines and boulders above the olives, and a low, white-washed chapel perched on the highest rocks. I looked at my companion as she sat under a sheltering stone, with the sun on her cheeks and her curved palms screening the spirit lamp from the chill breeze, and was ready to see in her the divinity of the hill-top, the true guardian spirit, more really enthroned than the scrubby teak images we had left by their altars below. No gabled *tazaung* for her, but a white fane, a pure shrine for this Madonna della Guardia. I sat and pondered and wondered whether Hanbury, stewing among the toddy palms beneath us, knew where to turn for his Mecca.

The thought of Hanbury brought me to earth with a run. What, after all, was the beggar to her ? It was not till he had been foolish, and she had been prevailed on to put him off, that she had given him a second thought, I was sure. Would she ever give him a third ? Frankly, his chances of climbing into the radiant ranks of the Commission were low. At best she would have a weary wait for that consummation ; six or eight years, perhaps.

" What a scandalous waste of a young life ! " I said to myself, and it was suddenly borne in upon me that Hanbury was a pestilential young fiend. Why should my little Madonna be squandered on him,

when there were numbers of other men ready and able to take her now? I grew quite hot and pettish at the thought. Suppose he kept her dangling all those years, and in the end never came up to the scratch. Where would the other men be? Who the "other men" were was vague, but I may as well say that I found myself figuring among them, a trifle shamefaced in this juvenile elbowing company. How I got in I am not prepared to say, but there at any rate I seemed to see myself, and what concerned me was not my getting in, but, as I had put it, the disgraceful waste of a young life.

She had a healthy young appetite, my Madonna! After seeing that our Burman had a hunk of cake to consume, and discovering that I could eat no more, she polished off the biscuits. I think Hanbury would not have noticed, or, if he had noticed, would not have liked it. He was at the futile age when he would have imagined her living on air! But perhaps I was a little hard on Hanbury.

I was getting my grumble out, but, at the same time, enjoying myself enormously, and she entered into my enjoyment, was glad I was having it made up to me for the loss of my sea trip, and said so, and, having said so, was further reminded. She was deep in the repacking of the tea basket when she spoke again.

"What a nuisance about your sister!" she exclaimed.

I looked a little guiltily at her. She was wrapping up the cups in paper with her head on one side. "A horrid nuisance!" I replied. "I had hoped to have the time of my life in India."

"I should think so!" she cried. "And it was all the wretched bridesmaid's fault, wasn't it?"

The bridesmaid! I saw Mrs. Cavisham had been talking. "Yes, it was largely the bridesmaid's doing." I admitted, finding that I rather resented her being called the "wretched bridesmaid." What had I said to make them think *that*?

"I call it most inconsiderate of her!" she informed me.

Immediately I was up in arms against my Madonna. "Ah, you don't know her!" I said.

She mused a moment over the saucers. "Did you know her well?" she asked.

"Very well indeed," I replied; and, as I spoke, I felt I was looking every whit as glum as Hanbury at his worst. I wished they were not all so fond of raking the bridesmaid up. My companion little knew how green a wound she was fingering. And what upset me more than her talking about Ada was the way she from time to time reminded me of her. If the truth be told, it was just a foolish little trick of blinking that the pair had in common, a brisk candid brushing away of dewdrops with well fringed lids. I had found the habit adorable in Miss Meredith, and I must confess that it was hardly less attractive in Miss Cavisham. It all showed me how deep that little witch, Ada, had struck her roots. In fact I was next moment brought up short by the question whether, after all, my Madonna did not appeal to me simply by virtue of her likeness to another young lady. I ranged the two pictures side by side. She of the hill-top was robuster than Ada, less wayward, less cajoling. She would never

be as picturesque as Ada, Ada never as transparent as she. But positively, in my present mood, it was that particular unforgettable flutter of the lids that was Miss Cavisham's main ornament.

"She got engaged at the last moment, didn't she?" my companion went on, pursuing the subject relentlessly.

I answered "Yes."

She continued to keep me on the rack. "Did you know the man?" she asked.

I was as short as I could be with her. "Slightly," I replied.

She was not to be shaken off. "Is he nice?" she demanded.

I thought of the black-browed Thomas, and shook my head. "Not nearly nice enough for her," I said. "He's an ass," I assured her, consigning Thomas without a twinge to the same despicable category as Hanbury, whose enormity, by the way, seemed to have suddenly shrunk on being placed alongside of Archer's.

"What a pity!" she declared. She looked at me reproachfully, and I, who had been a little fluttered by this sudden hostile interest in the bridesmaid (in a way, you know, *my* bridesmaid), was all at once given clearly to understand that the matter was that I ought to have stepped in and rescued the maiden before the black-browed one could snatch her away. It was precisely at this moment that I recalled how she had brightened when I said I was thirty-five and not a "heaven-born," and I almost laughed outright. I again pictured the absurd possibility of my having been held up by her stepmother to

Miss Cavisham as a preferable alternative to Hanbury. Of course the young lady would have none of me, but, so long as I was more or less "possible," Hanbury was in danger. Now, however, every word I was saying was making me less and less dangerous. How, indeed, could an elderly party who was still only a subdivisional officer be regarded as seriously eligible? And how, if, on the top of his other disabilities, the veteran could be shown to have a doddering penchant for another lady? Miss Cavisham's brimming eyes fairly told me that I was behaving very badly in not having and displaying such a weakness. I was invited to consider how very much more convenient it would be for every one concerned if I could make such a display. A sudden accommodating impulse, a desire to show my hand as fully as she had shown hers, made me go to lengths I should ordinarily have deemed preposterous.

"A pity! I should think it was," I murmured, with my eyes on the stretching plain. "If I had only known!"

I left it just at that, but it was enough, I could feel. She could barely suppress her sigh of content. "Ah!" she said, softly, as she rose to her feet. I rose too, and stood opposite her, with the tea basket in my hands. "I'm so sorry, so very sorry," she whispered, and I had only to look into her eyes to see how delighted she was. Everything was making me more and more a wholly negligible obstacle.

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. CAVISHAM'S conjugal fervour had evaporated by the time we were back from the mountain-top. Something told me that we should find her husband without her when we regained the rest house, but no corresponding intuition had prepared me for the thoroughness with which he had solaced himself for her absence. Miss Cavisham's astounded cry of "Papa!" as we topped the verandah steps was his first intimation of our arrival. He rose to his feet, with stiff contortions, at the sound, and I could tell as much by his face as by his trousers that he had been squatting native fashion on the plank flooring when he was disturbed. Ma Kin, the snake woman, in white jacket and pink waist-cloth, sitting, willowy and unfathomable, on a mat close by, had a thin bright smile of recognition for us. Two of the other members of the troupe crouched near the steps. They were perspiring freely, and it looked as though they had just been replacing one of their snakes in the basket that stood by the long arm-chair in which Mr. Cavisham ought, by every canon of propriety, to have been sitting.

The ethnologist groped feebly for his pince-nez. "Ah, you haven't seen Isabel out, I suppose,"

he conjectured sheepishly, after a survey of his surroundings. "These people came by appointment to show her the snakes, and now she has disappeared. It's really most provoking."

He looked as though it were more our presence than Mrs. Cavisham's absence that was provoking. His daughter dusted outlying portions of the good gentleman's person with eager care. "You've been positively grovelling, Papa!" she said. "Whatever made you go down on the dirty floor like that?"

Her father removed his glasses to wipe them. "One has to get into touch with these people if they are to open their hearts to one, you know," he explained. "It's a case of meeting them half way; coming down to their level, eh, Mr. Chepstowe?" He replaced his glasses, humming softly, and drove his hands into his pockets, evidently anxious to seek fresh topics. "You'd never believe it. Those fangs aren't drawn, you know," he went on. "I've seen them." He screwed up his mouth. "And it was specially for Isabel that they were brought, too," he mourned. "She said she was going out to meet you."

He took a short turn up and down the verandah. "Raw meat they feed them on, mostly," he went on, peering down a little apprehensively at the basket at his feet. "How they can reconcile it with their Buddhist teaching is what passes my comprehension. Live frogs! Most instructive, though. They tell me that snake charming has been in the family from time immemorial. Really, in spite of all one hears about there being no such things as caste in Burma, one is half tempted . . ."

He gaped absently and pulled his chin.

"But how on earth did you find all this out?" I asked in some surprise. "Whoever has been translating for you?"

He recalled himself with an effort. "Ah, well you may ask!" he said. "Really quite a coincidence. The young man who acted as our interpreter on board the steamer the other day; or so he says. I should not have recognized him myself, but he recalled the fact to me."

"Not Maung Myit, surely?" I cried.

"I did not catch his name," he said, "but I gathered that he was visiting the place in some Government capacity. Can it have been township officer? I seem to think that was the term he used. Why, you must almost have run up against him as you came in just now. It's barely two minutes since he left. A civil spoken young fellow. He was anxious to see you."

Miss Cavisham gave utterance to "Oh, the dear man! Had he that heliotrope thing on?"

I was, I must confess, less enthusiastic. "Around already!" I exclaimed. "The beggar has lost no time in earning travelling allowance." I glanced at the snake charmers who, I could see, were showing signs of restiveness. "I think these good people might follow Maung Myit," I observed. "Shall I tell them that they can go?"

Mr. Cavisham blinked around him. "It's too dark for further demonstrations, I fear," he murmured, "and it seems no use waiting for my wife. I think they had better go." He dived his hand into his pocket. "Would you mind thanking them very

much for the trouble they have taken, and saying how sorry I am that Mrs. Cavisham has so unaccountably failed us."

He beamed mildly on the snake charmers, who saluted and withdrew with the rupees I could not prevent him giving them.

Dusk was falling. Miss Cavisham disappeared to change. Her father, a little perturbed at his wife's continued absence, started out to meet her, following the path by which she had, he said, left the rest house. At his suggestion, I took the opposite road, which led down the hill, on the off-chance of her having made a circuit. The jungle fowl were shrill in the gloaming. The air was hot and heavy by contrast with the thin breeze of the mountain-top, and full of the trill and twitter of the night. A familiar evening bird sent out from the gloom of the jungle the Chink, chink, chink, chr-r-r-r-r-r! Chink, chink, chink, chr-r-r-r-r! that recalls to the torrid home-sick exile the sound of a stone skimming the surface of a frozen pond. At intervals a ghostly night-jar swished silently and suddenly up from the pale track ahead of me and disappeared into the murk of the bamboos that might have been pencilled in Indian ink on the yellow western sky.

I thought I had been heading away from the rest house and Mr. Cavisham's area of search, but, after I had covered a quarter of a mile, a sudden conviction seized me that I must have wandered into the student's line of country again, for at a bend in the path the bamboos opened out to show what was clearly Mrs. Cavisham's looked-for white figure

approaching me, with a taller form at its side. It took me a score of strides to calculate by what path Mr. Cavisham had managed to reach and secure his wife ahead of me, and I had barely reckoned out his probable detour and given his long legs their credit, when their closer approach told me that the taller of the two figures was not Mr. Cavisham after all, but Hanbury, whom I had pictured conscientiously broiling on the sandy stream bed at Ywathit. I remember thinking, as the distance between us lessened, that what at first had inclined me to the belief that it was her husband whom Mrs. Cavisham was with, was the familiar way in which the couple's arms seemed to be intertwined; but then I recollected that it was just so that she and I must have appeared as we strolled together, arm in arm, in Padu, the day Maria's letter came. Mine was not the only elbow she fancied gripping. "There, but for the grace of God, goes Robert Chepstowe!" I said to myself piously, sure that I could not, on that earlier occasion, have drawn away from Mrs. Cavisham's side with more of a guilty jump than did our young friend at sight of me. I knew precisely what he was feeling when finally we came to close quarters. It was too dark to see, but I swear I almost felt the glow on those hot cheeks of his. I should have been less than human if I had not thoroughly enjoyed it.

"Ho ho! young man," I laughed, "up again, are you? I thought you were booked for several days at Ywathit! Finished that investigation already, eh?"

He seemed to seek Mrs. Cavisham's eyes before

he answered. "I've only ridden up for the evening," he explained. "I shall go back to Ywathit to-night."

"What! back again?" I cried in astonishment. "Are you out after mileage, my son?"

"I only thought of it this evening," he muttered irrelevantly. It was just as though he was looking to Mrs. Cavisham for his cue, and for a few seconds we faced each other speechless in the gloom; he, I take it, glad enough of its cover. Somehow things were not being carried off as lightly as I had expected when I first rallied the youth.

Mrs. Cavisham now for the first time found her voice, and used it for purposes of her own. "Where is my husband?" she asked.

"He has gone off up the hill to look for you," I replied. "He has just had a snake *séance* of his own at the rest house. You ought to have been there, Mrs. Cavisham."

"Ought I?" she exclaimed. "What an old thing he is with his performances!" and then to me. "Have you had a pleasant afternoon with Meg?"

The question came as a kind of signal to us to resume our walk towards the rest house. "First-rate, thanks," I said. "We had tea on the top, and got back about a quarter of an hour ago. Those biscuits of yours were much appreciated."

"Tea on the top! Did you?" she echoed, and she gave Hanbury a look as much as to say, "What do you think of that?" I cannot say what he thought of it or of other things, but my own thoughts were active enough. I calculated that from Ywathit to

Mindaun; and back was a good twenty-two miles. And this, if you please, on the top of the eleven miles he had done that morning! If this was not devotion, where was that rare quality to be found? And for whose sake this treble ride? Was it for Miss Cavisham?

It seemed almost a betrayal to say "No," and yet I as good as said it. Or rather, I put it somewhat thus, that, if it had been for Miss Cavisham's sake that our young man had spurred out that afternoon, it was very much for Mrs. Cavisham's that he had not spurred a good deal faster. My hour on the hill-side had sharpened my vision and enlarged my outlook, and just as, on the mountaintop, I had had a shrewd idea that, in a manner of speaking, I had been told off to make the running against Hanbury, so now, on the foothills, I had a grave misgiving lest I should have been wanted to make the running against Hanbury precisely in order that that young man might be more fully available for another lady. I was a suspicious toad, I knew, and yet a suspicious toad I felt I must remain until I had learnt by what spirit of divination Mrs. Cavisham had known that Hanbury would be found on the road from Ywathit that evening, and why the beggar had so little of the air of a victim; looked so little as though he had been captured against his will.

And, now that I thought of it, he had been much like this when he first appeared on the scene in the Cavishams' train, tied to the elder lady's chariot-wheels and enjoying it thoroughly in a heavy resentful fashion. That phase had passed in time. Then had

come Miss Cavisham's turn, and Miss Cavisham's turn it would have remained, I doubt not, till the end of the chapter, had I not proved absolutely past praying for. I had been weighed, however, and found wanting, and whatever else might be, it was not Mrs. Cavisham's habit to stop out in the cold. The huntress had harked back to her old quarry. Our young friend was doubtless more difficult to secure this second time, but Mrs. Cavisham could still weave her spell about him. I could tell that by the catch in his voice, the defiant turn of his elbow, the nervous carriage of his head. I could tell it, if the truth be told (Heaven help me for a susceptible coxcomb!) by my own feelings as she moved beside me through the tepid twilight. I had come out all unsuspecting, and in a breath had been drawn into the heady vortex in which Hanbury eddied and wobbled, for if ever human being wobbled, it was the long indecisive stripling who stalked beside us, and whose main offence, I discovered, was that, instead of pushing on to his proper goal, and leaving us alone together, he chose to loiter on and make an exhibition of himself with a married woman.

"Tea and biscuits on the top!" cried Mrs. Cavisham again. "You energetic young things!"

"Young!" I echoed flippantly. "Oh, say that again, Mrs. Cavisham. I've had such a blow! Miss Cavisham looks upon me as hopelessly old. I believe she thought it tempting Providence to take a hoary old fossil like me out for a walk at all. She never expected to get me home again."

"What! Meg?" ejaculated Mrs. Cavisham.

"Oh, anything over thirty is antediluvian to her! Thought you old, did she? Whatever have you been talking to her about?"

"Mr. Hanbury and all his works, mostly," I said.

"How touching!" returned Mrs. Cavisham drily.

Hanbury wriggled and said "Eh? What?"

"All his works," continued Mrs. Cavisham.

"For example."

"Well, for instance, that he's trying to get into the Commission," I said.

Hanbury's suppressed snort sounded through the gloaming. "But what has that got to do with her thinking you so ancient?" demanded Mrs. Cavisham.

"I was telling her what centuries it was since I had got into the Commission from the police myself," I explained.

"Were you ever in the police?" she cried, and for a moment I would have given a good deal for light enough to see her face. "I never knew," she murmured and seemed to round upon Hanbury for an explanation.

"I thought I'd told you," he muttered in self-justification.

"Ten years ago it was," I said. "Oh, yes, I've been telling Miss Cavisham I wasn't a heaven-born. Do you know, she seemed quite pleased to hear it."

"I'm sure I don't know why," observed Mrs. Cavisham rather caustically.

I was reminded of her stepdaughter's remark "Isabel thinks a lot of that sort of thing." She evidently was not going to show me how much she thought, but I knew that, by this last admission

of mine, I had rendered myself even more past praying for than ever.

She made this fairly clear, in her own emphatic way, later. Hanbury quitted us by the rest house gate to wash in the tent before dinner. Mr. Cavisham had not yet returned from his search for his wife on the upper path. We lingered a moment together by the gate awaiting him. She spoke softly but insistently, with her eyes on the distant glimmer of light that came through the tent flap.

"Whatever is the good of encouraging him?" she demanded.

"Who's encouraging whom? I should like to know," I enquired artlessly.

"You can know if you like to," she retorted.

"Well, why shouldn't I encourage him?" I asked.

"Simply because it's hopeless," she replied. "He hasn't an anna to bless himself with, and she'll have nothing when she marries. It's absurd!"

"He may have an anna or two some day," I suggested.

"If he gets into the Commission, I suppose," said she.

"Precisely," I answered.

"And if he doesn't," she demanded.

For this I had no reply, and she went on. "And what chance do you honestly think he has of getting into the Commission?" she enquired, and I could get nothing more sanguine out than an indeterminate non-committal murmur. We peered up the path together in silence for a while.

"I thought," she complained, "that he was going to be sensible this morning and keep away and try and get over it; and now, this evening, up he comes flying again, as though he had been down a year. He can't keep away from her, silly boy!"

"Yes, silly fool!" I ejaculated, though, it must be confessed, in a sense other than hers.

The silence that followed was filled only by the boom of a big night beetle which was hovering in our neighbourhood. Presently she spoke again.

"Aren't you going to help me with him?" she asked.

I did not care if the darkness hid my smile or not.

"It doesn't seem to me that you need much helping with him," I muttered significantly.

I saw her white face gleam in the gloom, her white figure straighten suddenly. "What do you mean?" she asked, but I only laughed, and almost immediately she broke out again. "Can't you see I'm only doing it on principle?" she cried under her breath. "He's got to be kept away from her, made to think of other things. I don't see why you should object."

"Object!" I said. "Why ever should I object? Do I look like objecting?"

She had her retort all ready to fling at me. "If you don't object, why should you come racing down the hill to spy out what I was doing with him?" she demanded. "It looks as if you couldn't trust me with the boy!"

"Well, and suppose I said I couldn't?" I said.

"I shouldn't believe you!" she returned. Her indignation seemed to grow with every fresh word of mine. "A lot you care about what I think or

do!" she went on. "You've been horrid to me ever since you've known me. You only seem to want to cross me."

"Cross you! Oh, nonsense!" I cried.

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Well, do you trust me with him, then?" she asked.

Trust her! I thought of my little Madonna and her wobbling devotee, and said "No, I don't," truculently, and thumped with my fingers on the compound gate.

I half expected an outburst, but it did not come, at least not immediately. She seemed for a while to be straining her eyes up the path that her husband had left by, and I heard her give a little choking laugh.

"Well, you ought to be able to, with him, at any rate!" she said at last deliberately.

I, as deliberately (for I was a little puzzled) said, "Indeed!"

At that she burst out. "Yes, you ought to!" with her face close to mine, every bit as truculent as I had been.

I found my lips framing the quick question "Why ought I?"

I must have repeated the words, though I do not remember having done so, for the next thing I recollect her saying, with her face still near mine, was "Can't you see why?"

I had it on my tongue to say "My dear lady, I can't, in the least," but it suddenly and fiercely came over me that, if I couldn't see, I at any rate could guess. I put the idea straight from me almost before it leapt into life, but there its

impress lay. I could not in a lifetime describe all I felt at that moment. We must have faced each other in the throbbing gloom while we could have counted twenty, I wondering how I was going to face this strange new thing that the gloaming had brought forth. I had my eyes on her.

"I doubt whether you'll ever see anything!" she said with her short choking laugh again, and a second later she began to stiffen, from flame she was being turned to pure ice. Her voice grew thin and bitter. "Ah, there you are!" she said severely.

It took me a moment to grasp that it was to her husband and not to me that she was speaking. He had emerged like a ghost from the gloom behind me. I heard his large, placable bleat. "Yes, my love. I've been looking for you."

"You've been looking in the wrong direction, then," she said. "Whatever made you go that way?"

"Surely you told me——" he began, but she would have no patience with him. Her voice took on a still sharper note. "I didn't tell you to follow me!" she said. "Who was that you were with just now?"

He loomed up large and drooping, with his hands deep in his pockets. "Just now?" he echoed.

"Yes, just a moment ago, by the corner of the fence," she returned.

I saw him lift a hand to tug at his moustache. "I came across those snake charmers in the village again," he admitted.

"There was only of one them with you just now," she remarked coldly, and I marvelled at the sharpness

of her vision. "Have you been with her the whole time?"

"The whole time!" he expostulated. "My dear——!"

An exclamation of impatience from her cut him short. "You've had quite enough anthropology for to-day, Matthew," she remarked with clear-cut emphasis. "You don't seem to realize that it's past seven and time to get ready for dinner."

Simultaneously we all three turned and made slowly for the rest house. I breathed again. I had been given a respite; time to think it over.

I talked persistently to Mrs. Cavisham that evening after dinner and she gave me to understand that she knew I was doing it merely to keep her away from Hanbury, and was duly resentful. The effect of her fiery question by the compound gate had already begun to wear off. I saw that my heated imagination might easily have read more into the few words than Mrs. Cavisham had ever meant to put. In any case Hanbury was safe out of mischief. He seemed suddenly to have found the common ground with Miss Cavisham that I had missed the day before. I could hear the pair of them in the moonlight talking about the Commission, and have a kind of idea that he was reproaching her for having disclosed his intentions to me. He did not leave the rest house till ten o'clock and I should be sorry to have to say at what hour of the night or early morning he got back to Ywathit.

CHAPTER XIV

IT was a revenue enquiry that had brought Maung Myit posting up to Mindaungmyo within a week of the assumption of his new duties ; something connected with the toddy tree assessment, so far as I can recollect. If at this stage my memory fails me, let me say that it was no fault of Maung Myit's, who took pains to rub his mission mercilessly in from the moment he first saw me next morning. It was useless for me to refuse, while on leave, to be bothered with the concerns of the subdivision ; Maung Myit, sitting at my tent door, a little less prostrate on his mat than when he was a mere clerk, a little less dependent on his Burmese, soon brought me to my senses. It was through me that the order for the enquiry had come ; it was through me that his report would, in fullness of time, be submitted to headquarters. If I was not going to tell him whether he was working on the right lines, who could say that all the work might not have to be done all over again a few months hence, and this time by me ? This, you may suppose, came home in the desired quarter. Having thus captured my ear, the wretch passed on to other matters, which happen to have stuck more firmly in my memory.

Hanbury's venerable cattle theft case had a charming freshness for him. "I made a surprised visit to Shawbyu day before yesterday, your Honour, in connection," he told me. "I think there should be a fine under the Village Act. The complainant, one Maung Tin, states on the 12th lazan Wagaung he discovered the loss of a bullock of the colour of *nwa pya ni* and valued by thirty rupees from the place where he had kept tying on the previous evening on the northern side of his house."

I had heard this, of course, many times before, but force of habit made me keep the ball rolling mechanically. "Quite distinctive marks, so far as I recollect," I said.

"Yes, distinctive, sir," he made reply. "I asked him, 'Can you identify?' and he can identify the left horn was broken and remained hanging, and by the mark of rubbing which was due to touching with yoke pin at the time of ploughing."

"I've forgotten how far they tracked it," I observed.

"The tracks carried as far as Gwebin," he said. "Two men of Gwebin suspicioned, but nothing proved yet."

"To be sure; that man Tha Nyo," I said.

"Yes, sir, Tha Nyo and another man, a distant brother of Nga Tha Nyo, a coolie to him, but not always; he sends for him when he wanted to cut beef."

"Well," I said with a sigh, "if you want the village fined, send in your report to Maung Than Byu."

"I have already sent," he told me. "That Gwebin is a l. d village, sir. Evening the day before yesterday I met four persons on the road near Gwebin and stopped and made enquiries as to their movements, but, as they were proved to be *bona fide* and out for catching doves with torch-lights in their possession, they were allowed to proceed after giving them necessary warnings."

"Quite right, quite right," I murmured, stifling a yawn. "Keep an eye on all suspicious characters, Maung Myit. By the way, talking of bullocks, they tell me that the cattle pound at Gwebin is in a bad state of repair. Is that so?"

"The cattle pound in a good state," he reported, "but the stuckup notice of feeding charges is almost faded and must be renewed. I have mentioned in my diary."

"That's not enough," I told him. "Write in formally as well; otherwise the matter is bound to be overlooked."

"Shall I submit through your Honour?" he enquired, his face brightening.

"Certainly not," I said. "You seem to forget I'm on leave." He eyed me abashed, toying with the tuft of hair that sprouted from the mole beneath his left jaw. I saw him looking me up and down and calculating how many days there would be before my time would be up and he would be doomed to revert. The youth wished me well, no doubt, but the kindest that his desires could run to at the moment, I knew, was that the cause of the extension of my leave might be absolutely—really absolutely—painless . . .

The young man's devastating ponderings were interrupted by the arrival of Miss Cavisham. She came to tell us that the snake charmers were at the bungalow again and that there was need of interpreters to explain the situation to them. "It's really very awkward," began our young lady, and then, recognizing my morning visitor, she exclaimed, "Ah, how do you do, Mr. Myit?" She half held out a hand, but restrained herself in time. "So far as I can make out," she went on, "they have come specially for Isabel's benefit, as she was not there yesterday when they came, and she's still in bed and declines to get up for anyone, and we don't know how to tell them." She turned from me and focused Maung Myit engagingly, with her head on one side. "Isabel is Mrs. Cavisham, you know," she said. "It's hard to make them understand. Of course we couldn't show her to them in bed! I don't think we could have made them understand any other way. Perhaps you could put it nicely to them so that they will not be offended."

My visitor rose with alacrity, spreading his lilac waist-cloth as a ceremonious peacock might his tail. "They will not be offended, sir," he assured her with a smile.

And certainly, if the snake charmers were offended at anything, it can only have been at the lecture our young Jack-in-office read them in the rest house verandah for daring to disturb the ladies at so unconscionable an hour. In point of fact, nobody minded a twopenny bit, unless it were Mr. Cavisham. The snake men grinned at the rebuke,

rubbing the dust from their toes, and choosing with solicitude the biggest cracks in the flooring to eject their betel juice through. Ma Kin sat on through the scolding, smiling a soft haggard smile and keeping her inscrutable black eyes fixed on Mr. Cavisham's. I very soon pulled Maung Myit up. There was no reason, I said, why the performers should go away if they were wanted; and, indeed, the Cavishams would not hear of their going. The snake baskets were accordingly brought up from below, and one by one the reptiles were hauled out and held by two of the men for our timorous inspection. Their mouths were unceremoniously forced open; the snake women's lithe fingers played about the yawning cavities. With our eyes we saw their fangs, or what was said to be their fangs; with our hands Mr. Cavisham and I felt their cold coils. Even Miss Cavisham placed a finger for a moment on one of the scaly heads and, with a shudder, stepped back out of range. Nagagi the fretful, with his beard still hanging on his chin, was the last to be produced, and while he was being displayed, a purdah rattled its rings, and Mrs. Cavisham emerged from her bedroom into the verandah.

She was robed in something that hung straight and white and silky. Her eyes gleamed at the sight of the snake and a little cat-like bristle seemed to go through her, but she gave no other outward sign of enthusiasm. "At it again!" she observed drily. "One would think these people lived here!" However, once a spectator, she made no attempt to hide her interest. Crouched silent in a long arm-

chair, she watched the uncanny snake woman deal familiarly with the black sheep of her flock, twisting his great coils about her slender waist, letting his sulky flat head explore her brown neck and shoulders. At last when the beast had been consigned to the two men and Ma Kin had dropped back on to her mat, she stood up with her hand out.

"Let me hold him," she said.

At first the men did not understand; allowed her to touch and grasp the smooth body, but declined to let go of the head. She insisted, would not be deterred. "All by myself, you idiots!" she cried to them. "Oh, do tell them to let me alone, Mr. Chepstowe."

"Don't be foolish, Isabel!" piped Mr. Cavisham suddenly, but she had got her way even before the words were out of his mouth. She slipped her hands over the men's, and, ere I had realized what was happening, she had drawn away from them and was holding the reptile at arm's length. The two men circled round her with apprehensive grins. The rest of us held our breaths. Ma Kin, the only one unmoved, lolled on her mat with her thin lips curved indulgently. Mrs. Cavisham took two steps forward. Her voice came in panting exultation.

"She's not the only woman who can handle snakes, you see!" she said between her teeth (and I noticed that she seemed to be addressing me), and next moment she had tossed the waving beast from her on to the top of the snake woman.

I hardly know what really followed. I remember Miss Cavisham's scream, which seemed to precede the throwing. I remember old Cavisham's half-hearted

dive forward as though to avert a catastrophe. After that all my faculties were concentrated on the two male charmers, who were grabbing ineffectually at the reptile on the floor.

As Nagagy's blunt tail disappeared over the head of the veranda steps, and with it all immediate danger, I turned to find Mrs. Cavisham close to my side, backing into me, as it were, away from her husband, who stood with his hand out crying, "It as nearly as possible bit me, Isabel!"

"Why did you get in it's way, then, stupid? I had to put it down somewhere!" and then, as he turned from her towards the snake woman, "Of course it hasn't hurt her!"

She seemed to turn to me for confirmation, and something I must have been aware of immediately after the throwing enabled me to say with confidence, "No, she has not been bitten."

Ma Kin had not been bitten, it is true, but her soft smile was gone and she was furious, for the moment transformed. She was still on the mat, crouched low, with her eyes ranging between her assailant and the point where the snake had vanished, and a stream of imprecations pouring from her lips. She paid no attention at first to the agitated Matthew, who had flown to his usual panacea and stood over her, making a consolatory jingling in his pocket, as though to show that any damage done would be duly paid for; but when he stooped down in fatherly fashion to pat her on the shoulder she suddenly raised her head and her abuse melted into a pitiful wail. Mrs. Cavisham's hands were up rearranging her hair, which was

threatening to flood her shoulders, but at the altered sound she whipped round on her husband.

"Stop that, Matthew!" she cried. "I decline to have you pawing her about!" and Matthew's fingers sought the jingling depths again.

I cannot deny that Maung Myit rose effectively to the occasion. On tiptoe at the edge of the verandah, with his arms waving, and apparently oblivious of us Europeans, he was spurring on the snake men, who appeared to be following up the pursuit of Nagagyi below the rest house. A moment later he had descended after them. Already a polyglot clamour from outside told us that the fugitive had made his presence felt in the neighbourhood of the servants' quarters. As the fragments of sound came up to us in the verandah, Ma Kin pulled herself together, and, still sobbing softly, scrambled to her feet and scurried down the steps to join in the capture of the runaway. Mr. Cavisham chinked after her, and his daughter, evidently frightened lest the good man should expose himself to risk again, followed him half-way down the steps, with her hand passed through his arm. Thus it came about that Mrs. Cavisham and I were left for the moment side by side in the middle of the big verandah. She moved across me toward the steps while her hands patted her hair in position. She had a hairpin in her mouth.

"What was she saying just now?" she asked me, with raised eyebrows.

"The woman?" I asked. "Well, she was abusing you like a pickpocket, if you want to know. Whatever made you do that foolish thing?" I

went on, feeling that I ought to improve the occasion.

"Foolish!" she echoed. "Couldn't you see? I wasn't able to hold the beast any longer. Think of the weight. It had to go."

"You might have thrown it down elsewhere," I growled.

She looked up at me quickly with her hands to her nape. "Did you see her face?" she asked deliberately, as though that would have explained everything, adding, when I had nothing to say, "I couldn't help it. Besides, she was about the safest person to pass it on to, sitting smirking there, looking down her nose at me! The brute wouldn't have bitten her."

"Rubbish, of course it would have bitten her if it had had a chance!" I cried impatiently, but she paid no attention to what I said. She went on, between the white teeth clenched on the hairpin.

"Abused me, did she? I expect she did! Did you see Matthew try to push the snake off her? He did. That's how he nearly got bitten. When I threw it, too!" That, comically enough, seemed the enormity in her eyes. She repeated it again. "When I threw it," and I could find nothing but a short laugh to answer her with.

My laugh sank deeper than my words. She gave me a scornful side-glance. "You are a cold-blooded monkey!" she ejaculated. "You don't understand. I'm not jealous of her. Why ever should I be? I didn't mean to hurt her. I'll pay for the beast if it's lost; but—but, I'm not going to have him pawing her about."

She sent the hairpin savagely home. For a while we listened in silence to the hubbub in the compound. Then a long figure came creaking over the boards towards us.

"I suppose she thinks I did it on purpose," said Mrs. Cavisham, as the steps stopped behind her.

Her husband extracted his hands slowly from his pockets. "I've been trying to explain that it was an accident," he said, with a note of chilly reproof, "but at present she's far too excited to listen." He seemed to be weighing a handful of silver on his open palm as he spoke. "They tell me they value the snake at fifty rupees," he went on. "That's over three pounds in English money!" His voice suddenly rose to a grotesque shrillness. "I really do think, Isabel . . ." he began.

I thought it time to join in the snake hunt, and left the pair of them together, but if Mr. Cavisham imagined that he was going to get the best of it in the matter of Ma Kin and the snake, he was egregiously mistaken.

CHAPTER XV

THE search for Nagagyi proved unavailing. About midday a syce thought for a time that he had seen him near the stable, and half an hour later a rustle in the grass behind the cook house set the domestics shouting, but both were false alarms. The beast's hiding place was well chosen.

I had admitted the thin end of the wedge that morning when I allowed Maung Myit to consult me about toddy tree assessments. That fervid functionary followed his morning visit up with an afternoon one, and I guessed there was trouble abroad by his clouded brow and distraught attire. The rest house was a good twenty yards from the tent I was sitting in, but he kept a harassed glance over his shoulder on it all through his interview, as though we were under the shadow of its eaves and any whisper would carry to it.

"Your Honour, I am very disturbed," he began in a conspirator's undertone.

"What's the matter now?" I enquired.

"Ma Kin been talking to me," he said. "That woman is very angry, sir, against Mrs. Cavisham. She is come to me and stays abusing Mrs. Cavisham a great deal." He rounded his eyes and mouth.

I could see he had come to dump responsibility, and cursed my own weakness. "Oh, blow Ma Kin!" I said. "Don't listen to her. She'll get over it."

He nodded sapiently. "I tell her many times, 'Don't abuse! She is an English lady,' but she will not listen. She says she cannot bear it. She states she will prosecute."

"Prosecute! Tell her not to talk nonsense!" I cried. "If the snake is not found, she will get compensation. Mr. Cavisham has said so. She doesn't understand. He'll give her anything in reason."

"She is not wanting compensation," he explained. "She says she has been made ashamed by the throwing of the snake before many people. She wishes to prosecute for assault."

"Assault! There was no assault!" I returned.

"She speaks of her modesty has been outraged," he urged. "Section 354 applies."

"What the deuce does she know about sections?" I demanded sourly.

"No, sir, I do not say the sections to her," he protested.

My temper was evaporating slowly. "Confound you, Maung Myit!" I cried, "what do you mean by worrying me about these things when I'm on leave? Tell the woman not to be an infernal fool. Make her think it over." And then I spoilt it all by adding, "How the devil did you get hold of the section? Have you got a code here?"

A code! The fiend had half a dozen. They were produced by no other than Ma Kin herself,

who, at a brisk signal from him, crept softly from where she had been sitting all the time behind the tent flap. She was literally lop-sided with the weight of the volumes which the young ruffian had piled upon her, and which she now thrust one by one across the mat towards my visitor. This done, and having saluted me, she crouched suppliant, with her elbows on the ground and her fingers together at her chin. She never took her eyes off my face.

"Section 354 not compoundable," began Maung Myit, fluttering familiarly through the fattest of the tomes.

"Easy on, young man," I said, hoping to choke him off quickly with a technicality. "Before you go any further, just remember that Mrs. Cavisham is a European British subject."

He was quite prepared for this. "This is also what I am telling her," he assured me. "I cannot take cognizance at all. But she keeps saying your Honour able to take cognizance."

"Duffer! how often am I to tell you I'm on leave?" I cried. "I've given over charge. I haven't a ha'porth of jurisdiction."

"But your Honour is Justice of the Peace," he objected.

"That makes no difference," I returned.

He blinked back dubiously at me. "No jurisdiction," he repeated. He rolled the phrase over his tongue as a *gourmet* might a vintage port. Then over his shoulder he cried angrily in Burmese to the snake lady, "His Honour can do nothing for you. Why are you worrying him?"

Ma Kin, behind her fingers, was subdued but shrill. "I want to prosecute," she told us in her own language. "I want to prosecute. I am exceedingly ashamed!"

I shrugged my shoulders inflexibly. "She must go and see Maung Than Byu about it," I said.

"Go to the subdivisional officer at Padu," commanded the township officer. "Can't you see that his Honour is very angry?"

"His Honour himself is subdivisional officer," objected the petitioner.

"I tell you I'm not!" I exclaimed in Burmese. "I'm on leave, silly woman, a month's leave. I cannot try the case."

"I do not wish your Honour to try the case," said Ma Kin. "I wish the Deputy Commissioner to try it."

"Very well, go and see him about it!" I cried.

"I wish his Honour to report the matter to the Deputy Commissioner for orders," she persisted.

"I'm not going to report the matter!" I growled. "I've nothing to do with reports or complaints now. Take her away, Maung Myit, and tell her not to be fool. How on earth do you imagine I can deal with the matter when I'm on leave?"

Maung Myit put his books together with a reluctant air. The woman saw a beckoning finger and rose to a sitting posture, but did not drop her hands or take her eyes off me. "Will your Honour give evidence in the case?" she asked over her finger tips.

"If I get a summons, I shall have to," I returned with a laugh, and, throwing myself back in my chair, I put my feet up, as an indication that the inter-

view was at an end. He "shooed" her off as he might have an intruding hen. The pair withdrew with salutations. He rolled off ten paces ahead of her. She had all the books to carry—went doubled beneath their weight.

The afternoon was warm. I lay still for a while with my feet up, lulled by the flap of the plantain leaves, pondering the situation, studying my white canvas boots. What with one thing and another my little holiday promised to give me a surfeit of excitement. My holiday, forsooth! I tried to take a dispassionate, outside view of myself, stretched there in my long arm-chair, a thick-necked unimpressive party in creased grey flannel, and could hardly forbear a jeer at the picture I showed. Here was I, faring up to Mindaung, serenely prepared for Arcadian dallying on its cool slopes, plumped suddenly into the thick of this vexatious business, and like to be still deeper in it before the week was out. A pretty figure I cut! Deep in it, I was, and yet (that was the irony of it) not in it at all, or, at any rate, not recognized as in it. I was not, indeed. No one wanted me. I was only in the way, an impediment to one of the ladies, an irritant to the other. I had felt hopelessly *de trop* that morning at the breakfast table that I heard Mrs. Cavisham in her bedroom passionately refusing to grace with her presence. I was an intruder, an interloper, and, if I had not had vague qualms of responsibility, I should have packed bag and baggage forthwith and made my original bee line for Darjiling or Penang, but, just at the moment, matters were too ticklish for me to leave. Whether a nuisance or not, I felt it

my duty to stop on and see how Mrs. Cavisham was going to emerge from her escapade and what, of all things, the snake woman was going to make of her case. I might perhaps be of assistance somewhere. They would just have to put up with me, till Hanbury came back, at any rate.

The concluding reflection must have merged into something of the nature of an afternoon nap, for I remember opening my eyes with a sense less of surprise than of destiny, to see before me in the flesh what I had seemed a moment before to behold in the spirit, to wit, Ma Kin's fine face of tragedy. And when I say "in the spirit," let me at once admit that this strange slender brown thing with sad eyes was beginning to haunt me with weird pertinacity. In whatever guise she had come before me, whether caressing her loathsome pets with her life in her hand, or sobbing her almond eyes out on the verandah floor, or wailing for justice to a brace of pitiless bureaucrats, she had always figured as something altogether pathetic and appealing; her thin face had a knack of hanging reproachfully before me, and even if Mrs. Cavisham could not, I could—to put it crudely—easily understand the large-hearted Matthew's desire to comfort her, to protect her, in a word to "paw her about."

I had no idea how long she had been kneeling there. I rubbed my nose hard. "What is it, Ma Kin?" I asked, dropping my feet off the leg rests.

She would say nothing at first, kept her eyes fixed on the mat, her joined palms pressed against her wan cheek. "I am very much ashamed!" she cried at last.

I raised my eyebrows indulgently. "How many times are you going to tell me that?" I asked.

She murmured something that I failed to catch. "Come nearer," I said, and she came nearer. "Don't be frightened," I went on. "Nearer still," and she sat at my feet, almost on my white canvas boots, and spoke.

"I cannot go to Nyaungbin to see the Deputy Commissioner," she said. "I have no money."

"No one wants you to go to the Deputy Commissioner," I remarked.

"The Myook says I must go to him," she complained.

"No need to go if you do not want to," I assured her. "Where is the Myook?" I went on, peering over her head. "What has he been saying to you?"

"He is in the village," she replied. "He would not come with me to your Honour a second time. He is angry."

"A second time," I cried. "Well, what have you come to me about a second time?"

"I have come to tell your Honour that I am ashamed," said she.

"Is that all?" I asked. "If so, you had better go away, Ma Kin."

"And to say that I do not wish to go to Nyaungbin," she went on.

I made her look up at me. "I do not want you to go to Nyaungbin," I told her.

"But if I do not go to Nyaungbin, I shall not be able to bring the case," she moaned.

"Why are you still talking about cases?" I

demanded, with a show of anger. "The *thakinma* dropped the snake. She did not know you would be near where it fell."

She hung her head, but her answer came up clear. "The *thakinma* threw the snake because she hates me. If I had been bitten, I should have died."

I had to be rather fierce at this. "Alaga!" I ejaculated. "Rubbish! What next, I wonder. Why should she hate you, stupid woman?"

"Because the *thakin*, her husband, is kind to me," she whispered sullenly, behind her hands, and all I could do was to emit a succession of angry sounds.

"You won't get a conviction," I said at last, very baldly, "and you will cause me no end of trouble."

"The *thakinma* caused me much shame," was her reply.

"But you will be causing shame not only to the *thakinma*, but also to the *thakin*," I said. "If the *thakin* has been kind to you, why do you want to shame him?"

She murmured, "I should never bring a case against the *thakin*."

"Then why against the *thakinma*?" I asked.

"Because she insulted me and lost my snake," she returned.

"You'll get compensation without bringing a case," I assured her.

"I do not want compensation," she said. "Will the *thakinma* ask my pardon?"

I gave a little laugh. "*Thakinma*, don't ask pardon," I said. "It is not the custom. Look here, will you prosecute if the *thakin* asks you not

to? Remember, he tried to push the snake off you when it fell."

She had no answer ready at first. She could only look down at her hands. At last she muttered, "If the *thakin* does not wish me to prosecute, I will not." She bowed forward. Her head was almost touching my knees. "What will be the good of prosecuting?" she whispered wearily. "If your Honour gives evidence to say that it was an accident, there will be no conviction."

"The *thakin* not bringing a case?" I exclaimed, cheerfully.

"I will not bring a case," she said with something like sob.

"That's right!" I cried. She was very close to me and very meek and abased and pitiable, and, as I saw a living sinner, I bent down and patted her shoulder, just as that silly old Cavisham might have patted it, and, having patted it, drew myself up and looked over her head into Mrs. Cavisham's blazing eyes.

Obviously, by every rule of the game I ought to have faced her sheepish and abject, at best and most brazen, armed with a flippant grin. I can only suppose that it was the sudden stab of responsibility that braced my nerves and fortified me. I knew I had somehow to prevent a scene, save Mrs. Cavisham from her unguarded self. I doubt whether I have ever felt so sustained and serious in my life.

She stood silent, with the hot sunlit compound behind her, scanning us fixedly, her hand resting on my camp table. I had plenty of time to steady my

voice. Then, as I rose to my feet, I addressed the snake woman in as natural a tone as I could compass. "And now," I said, "as the *thakinma* has come, you had better go, Ma Kin."

A man would, I think, have looked round behind him. Not so Ma Kin. She drew away from me almost imperceptibly over the mat. It was as though she had learnt the trick from one of her own snakes. Not a sound came from her. She was several feet off before I addressed the figure that stood upright by the table; stood and continued to cover us with her vengeful glance.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mrs. Cavi-sham?" I said at last.

"You can send that woman away," she answered, drily. "For so long as I am here, at any rate."

"I have already told her she may go," I returned.

"Well, why doesn't she go, then?" said she. She stepped forward till her skirts brushed the object that lay on the floor between us. She thrust passionately at it with her foot, and, as though in response to the touching of a spring, a thin pale face turned slowly up to her. "*Jao!*" she cried, truculently, for want of Burmese, and her menacing finger made up for Ma Kin's lack of Hindustani. Obedient, the snake woman crept away.

I was angry by this time. I stood opposite my visitor with my hands in my pockets. "And now, perhaps, you will tell me what else I can do for you," I said.

"I came to borrow a book," she replied, loftily. "I shouldn't have intruded, naturally, if I had thought you had visitors."

"A book!" I said, "What book?"

"Oh heavens! it doesn't matter now," she cried.

"Then what else can I do for you?" I enquired.

She replied with a scornful laugh. "You can forgive me for intruding," she said. "It was unintentional, of course. If I had had the least idea——"

"Please don't apologize," I said stiffly. "It may interest you to know that I was merely——"

"Oh, please don't apologize *yourself*," she cried.

Her tone, her look, made me cast discretion to the winds. "I was only congratulating Ma Kin on having come to a very proper decision," I said.

"Indeed!" she scoffed. "And what decision was that?"

"The decision not to prosecute you," I returned, and looked to see the effect.

"Me! Prosecute me!" she cried. "What, for letting that beast fall on her? She had the face! And you mean to say, Mr. Chepstowe, that you allowed her to squat there and calmly talk to you about prosecuting me?"

"Oh, I wasn't going to have it," I assured her.

"I should think not indeed! It was a piece of unspeakable impudence," she averred.

"It was foolish," I said, "but after all, you know, when . . ."

"It was disgraceful insolence," she persisted.

"And may I ask if you persuaded her not to?"

"I did," I replied stiffly.

"Very kind of you!" she sneered. "And I suppose for your sake the creature agreed not to."

It had not been for my sake, I knew, but for Mr. Cavisham's. However, I thought it expedient, when I looked into Mr. Cavisham's wife's face, to say, "Yes."

"And what I saw just now was her reward for agreeing not to prosecute, I presume," she went on.

"Reward!" I cried hotly.

She drew herself up. She gathered her skirts around her, as though anxious to avoid the contamination of my surroundings. "I have apologized for intruding," she whispered, hoarsely. "Allow me to make one more apology. I called you a cold-blooded monkey, Mr. Chepstowe, this morning. Allow me to retract what I said then. I'm sure, if I had had the very remotest idea . . ."

And with that she left me, and to this day I have never learnt what book it was she had wanted to borrow.

CHAPTER XVI

I HAVE, as occasion demanded, alluded ere this to Mrs. Cavisham's ayah, a buxom, brown-armed Madrasi wench, with whom my gallant Daniel was pleased to have much in common. This handmaiden had been hovering persistently in my line of vision all through the early tea hour the following morning. Skirt brushing and topi whitening had brought her about seven o'clock down to the portion of the compound at the foot of the rest house steps that my tent door commanded. Human interest kept her there, but none of my providing. If you must know, the outstanding feature of the morning for her was the fact that Daniel was busy packing boxes in the shadowy lee of the tent. The carts, with my advance baggage, were to leave after breakfast for Padu, and with the carts Daniel. The ayah was disconsolate. At half-past seven, behind one of the rest house posts she plied him with the latter end of a mug of coffee, gabbling swiftly to him while he drank. It might have been a stirrup cup! A distant cry put an end to the tender episode. I saw her hurry away to her mistress.

The fact was—and you may have guessed it—that, Ma Kin having abandoned her prosecution and Hanbury having suddenly sent word that he would

be up from Ywathit during the day, I deemed myself now justified in leaving the Cavishams to their enjoyment of Mindaung, and spending the balance of my holiday elsewhere. Where that was to be I could not say. Penang and Darjiling, though I had spoken to my companions with vague enthusiasm of both at dinner the evening before, seemed suddenly to have grown uninviting, but go I must, and that without delay. The situation had become intolerable. By every word and gesture Mrs. Cavisham was showing me how distasteful my presence was. Even her husband had begun to see that something was amiss, and though, when I announced my plans, he urged me to reconsider them, I know he was as relieved as anybody at my standing firm. I had dreaded the business, but, now that it was over, my decision seemed the most natural thing in the world. I had always meant to take my leave outside Burma. Hanbury would be there to fill my place, translate and make himself generally useful. In the end the matter passed quite gracefully, and Mrs. Cavisham gave me a look which told me that at last I had done the sensible thing. I was to ride off that evening. By the afternoon of the morrow I should be back in Padu, in good time for the down steamer. And so, as I have said, the ayah was disconsolate.

And now, at about eight o'clock, who should come shooting nimbly down the rest house steps, as though propelled through the morning sunlight by an unseen catapult, but the sleek damsel aforesaid, open-eyed and vociferous, her white robe fluttering. She was all shrill Tamil at first for Daniel's benefit,

though both of them burst immediately into English to enlighten me. However, even before they had, in unison, screamed the word "Snake!" I knew that Nagagyi must have appeared on the scene, and sprang to snatch the broad-bladed Kachin *da* that hung from the tent pole above my bed. Ten steps took me to the rest house. Through a growing uproar I bounded up the stairway and darted across the verandah as far as the door of Mrs. Cavisham's bedroom. The trouble clearly lay on the further side of the green and white purdah that shrouded the entrance. From the verandah railings the ayah urged me recklessly forward, but on the threshold I halted for permission to enter.

"Good heavens, no! you can't come in!" came a voice from inside, coupled with the stormy creaking of a wooden bedstead.

"Is it in there?" I roared back.

"Yes, somewhere in the room."

"Then come out!" I shouted. "Slip anything on and come out!"

The agonized reply rang "I can't come; the brute is between me and the door, between me and *all* the doors!"

"I must come in, then," I cried.

"Oh, come in if you want to," she snapped.

"I've lots on. Only, for goodness' sake, look out! It may be anywhere. I daren't move!"

I lifted the hangings and peered in, *da* in fist. Overturned chairs, a tumbled scarlet blanket, bath towels and a disarray of feminine attire seemed to afford at first sight cover on the floor for half-a-dozen lurking hamadryads. A dressing bag gaped at me

from the folds of a striped mat. A water jug lay on its side in the corner. Its contents were dribbling noisily through the bare planks on to the ground below. A camp bed rose out of this welter like an island out of a tossing sea, and, standing on it, huddled into a lilac dressing-gown, with the mosquito nets twined round her, was Mrs. Cavisham. I now saw that she was the only person in the room. Miss Cavisham's voice, of which I had had a confused recognition through the din, came from beyond the matting partition of the adjoining room, offering desperate counsel. "Perhaps it's under the bed, Isabel. Make for the bathroom, or try the window!"

"Keep quite still, Mrs. Cavisham," I cried from the door, trying to keep still myself. "It's bound to move directly and show us where it is. Then we can see which way it will be safest for you to go out by. It can't hurt you where you are, if you will pull the nets down."

"How do you imagine I'm to keep still if I'm pulling the nets down?" she demanded, fiercely. "I'm not going to attract it's attention. I wish you wouldn't speak to me! There! There! Didn't you see that towel move? Can't you see from where you are?"

"It's probably under the almirah," I said. "Keep quite still."

It seemed ridiculous that we should be unable to locate a twelve foot monster in a room very little longer than the beast itself, but the *chick* outside was down and the light was poor, and, strain our eyes as we would, there was no sign of any living

thing on the floor. A stray tooth-brush, that had been resting precariously against a chair leg, suddenly toppled and fell, and sent Mrs. Cavisham deeper into her mosquito nets, but it was not Nagagi.

"Have you seen it?" Miss Cavisham's voice reached us through the partition again.

"Will you be quiet, Meg!" cried her stepmother.

"I want to try and hear it moving. I wish that water would stop splashing! Can't *anyone* stop it?"

It was a moment later that the doorway behind me was darkened, and I heard Mr. Cavisham's voice. He seemed to have been summoned urgently from the village. He brought a reek of fish paste and sandal wood with him. "Dear me, dear me! What is all this?" his high-pitched deliberate accents rang out over my shoulder. "We must rout the monster out. They tell me the ayah was nearly bitten."

"Oh, do hold your tongue, Matthew!" ejaculated his wife from within.

The student's voice rose higher. "What! in there still, my dear?" he cried, coming closer to peer into the semi-darkness. "You're doing nothing foolish, I trust. If you love me, no more exhibitions. You remember last time. Come out, please, I beg of you!"

"Exhibitions!" she cried. "Do I *look* like exhibitions? You're too idiotic for words, Matthew. Go away! I'm not going to move till I know where it is."

"Come here at once!" he shouted, striving to gird his marital authority on.

I felt him pressing in behind me. I tried to hold him back. "One moment," I said. "Let me see first whether it's between the bed and the door," and I made a step forward and struck on the floor with my *da*. Mr. Cavisham behind me, cried, "Shoo! Shoo!" and I took a second step and smote again.

"Come along now!" exclaimed Mr. Cavisham.

"Not yet! not yet!" I shouted, but she had already made a bound towards me.

If I had had time to remember anything, I should have been reminded, by that leap, of the snake woman's first dramatic flick into her snake basket. Straight up between us a black and speckled thing whipped from the shelter of a blanket, and I slogged at it at sight, blindly. How, in slashing, I managed to miss Mrs. Cavisham, I shall never know. In some quick cat-like fashion she twisted clear both of my blade and the cleft jaws, and, twisting, fell on hands and knees. My first blow sang through the empty air. With all my precious theorizing, I had not allowed for the downward dip in the beast's stroke, and the *da* travelled high; but when the angry hood jumped up again, threatening, directly over the lilac dressing-gown, I laid it on a second time, a few inches from the floor and felt the keen steel draw on something crisp and sliceable that met and doubled to it like a juicy lily stem to a walking stick. I heard Mrs. Cavisham gasp "Oh!" and immediately scaly coils seemed to come up and writhe in torment here and there all over the room, and the mottled head flapped harmlessly across the boards away from Mrs. Cavisham's bare feet.

I delivered three or four more chops to make assurance doubly sure, and turned, panting, to see her upright, pushing away her husband's enfolding arms. "I do wish you would not fuss, Matthew!" she cried. "I'm perfectly all right! It didn't touch me. Absolutely all right!" She turned from him to me. "Did you know it was there?" she asked, trying to cover the hysterical catch in her voice. "It was just like a conjuring trick, wasn't it? I could have got past it all right, you know—perfectly all right. Do you realize, you bloodthirsty creature, that you nearly murdered me with that horrid looking knife thing? . . . Now, for goodness' sake, don't hack it about any more . . . there's mess enough as it is . . . Besides, I'd like the skin . . . We're going to pay for it."

She kept it up somehow till I was gone. Miss Cavisham came and enveloped her in shawls. The ayah raised a caterwaul at the blood on her gown. I withdrew, swinging my gory blade, dragging the corpse with me. Outside in the verandah I heard her first choking sob, and drove the cluster of gaping servants before me down the steps.

CHAPTER XVII

A MESSENGER despatched forthwith for the snake charmers, came back with the news that they had returned that same morning at daybreak to their own village, Pyogaung.

A mounted constable went to call them in to receive payment for the dead snake. Meanwhile Nagagyi lay in state in the shade in front of the stables, and the scent of him set the crows talking and loaded the upper branches of the pipal trees hard by with a crew of moody but observant vultures. Mr. and Miss Cavisham and I breakfasted together. There was a polite message of farewell for me from Mrs. Cavisham, who regretted that she was not up to seeing me before I left.

About noon the policeman came back to say that, of the charmers, only Ma Kin was to be found at Pyogaung and that she absolutely declined to come in to be paid. It was soon after this that I stepped out to superintend the skinning of the carcase, an operation that brooked no further delay.

Ten minutes later I countermanded my carts, sent a message in to the Cavishams to say that I proposed deferring my departure for the present, and ordered my pony to be saddled. Within half an hour I was riding towards Pyogaung.

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And the moment when I altered all my plans arrived while I was standing over the long yellow belly, and the waterman, who had undertaken the business of flaying, was advising as to the place for the first incision. The body had been laid at full length, and, as I kicked away the flies that hovered round the wicked, gore-bedabbled mouth, I glanced at the lower jaw, to see how much of the sloughed skin that had always been Nagagyi's most distinctive feature remained. His hanging beard was certainly gone. This, considering the attention I had paid with my Kachin *da* to the region of his head, was hardly surprising. What puzzled me was that there was not a vestige of any further sloughing anywhere on the upper part of his body. And then, all at once, I was faced by a discovery. Just before Nagagyi's escape, that ill-conditioned reptile had, it may be remembered, been held out by the men for me to examine, and (if I wished) to handle; and it came back to me, as I held down the flat head with my foot, that, when last I had had it before me, there had been a scar a few inches behind the eyes. It was a badly healed rent, not far from the curve of the hood, which one of the men had told me at the time was a legacy from the fateful day when the culprit had caused Ma Kin's sister's death. I gathered that it had been inflicted on the beast in the heat of the moment, that the wounded animal had not been despatched by its Buddhist owners, but left to die as natural a death as it could, and that, contrary to expectation, it had not died, but lived, to be, if not forgiven, at any rate taken back into the troupe. I turned the head over to

look for the brand of Cain, but, battered as that member was, I could see that there was no scar there.

I pondered the matter in silence for a minute or two, the waterman, a big-mouthed Uriya, fingering his blade judicially the while, waiting for my order to fall on. I was thoroughly puzzled. Really, it looked almost as if Nagagyi were still at large and as if it were another member of Ma Kin's grisly quartet that I had killed. If so, was I right in thinking (as I felt inclined to think) that the long snake's presence in Mrs. Cavisham's bedroom might very well have some connection with the stormy encounter in my tent the afternoon before. Mrs. Cavisham had talked then, not without offence, of "rewards." Had Ma Kin, I wondered, provided a reward of her own devising for the kick of contumely I had seen the *thakinma* give her? If the facts did not give ground for serious thinking, I should like to know what would.

I found myself enormously interested, curiously anxious to get to the bottom of it. It occurred to me, as I ruminated, that horseback was not a bad place for solving problems, and that a horse would soon take me to Pyogaung. Everything pointed to a journey for enlightenment, and so, to the waterman's surprise and the vultures' disgust, the skinning was put off for a couple of hours, and to Pyogaung I cantered.

Following the sweep of the ridge along a little used cart-track, I reached the village in about half an hour. I had visited it once in the past, and knew it as a hamlet of about twenty houses, with a reputa-

tion in the matter of cleanliness and good behaviour that left a good deal to be desired. The heavy timber village gate hung awry on its hinges. It was three-quarters closed, but I was able to get in without dismounting or even disturbing what surely might have claimed to be the oldest inhabitant, whose bleached top-knot and shrivelled trunk swayed languidly over some basket work in the thatched guard-hut inside the entrance. From this bleary-eyed ancient I tried to learn which of the hovels within the girdling thorn hedge was Ma Kin's, but only got a toothless mumble and a vague wave of a skinny arm in reply, and pushed on to further search. The inhabitants seemed all to be away, working in their fields. I might almost have been in a city of the dead. The huts basked tenantless in the afternoon glare. Not a bark disturbed the silence as I jogged up the village street. The tethered buffaloes barely opened their eyes as I passed. A lean fowl on my shoulder moved off with leisurely tread from under my saddle's hoofs, and finally two small half-clad boys rose up out of the dust of the highway, and, with one panic-stricken stare, scuttled into a plantain clump, leaving the flat brown *gonnyin* seeds they had been playing with for my pony to tread on.

It was while I was gazing after the dwarfish couple, wondering whether it were worth while calling them out of their hiding place to put me on my way, that I caught sight of an object that promised to end my search, nothing more or less than the barbaric red, black and white of the cloth that, I remembered, covered the snake charmer's baskets. It lay along the raised bamboo edge of the open verandah of a

beetle-browed hovel, no better than its fellows, to the right of the road. I turned my pony towards the hut, dismounted outside and hitched my reins over the fence of untrimmed timber that separated the compound from the highway.

There were marigolds, roselle, and a few heads of maize growing in the sun-baked patch on each side of the path. A paddy pounder stood at the bottom of the ladder leading up into the verandah. At the top staggered a smeary-faced naked infant with a maize cob in its wet fist. Ma Kin as the mother of unsavoury brats was an aspect of affairs that was new and disillusionizing, but I was out for facts, not fantasy. I reached the top of the ladder.

Seated in one corner of the fenced platform, in the shade of the eaves, was the snake charmer, with a bamboo tray in front of her full of lumps of meat which she was chopping lazily. She had her back to me, and, as the child stared and dribbled and let me pass without a word, was not aware of my presence till the bamboo flooring at her side sank to my tread. Then she looked round, and, at the sight of her scared face, all my suspicions stood out for the moment as good as justified. It was not so much at me she gazed as at something she seemed to expect to see rising behind me. When nothing followed, and she saw I was alone, the fright died away from her eyes and lips a little, but she appeared unable to hide her feelings with the smile that but seldom failed her. She drew her cloth about her, and the infant at the head of the steps tottered past me into her arms. She was glad of something to keep her hands engaged and her eyes off me.

I found a seat on the edge of the verandah, perched myself on it and faced her. "When did you get back here?" I asked.

"This morning, early," she said.

"Where is your husband?" I enquired.

She told me that he had gone into the jungle to cut wood. "I am all alone here," she added.

"One of your snakes was found in the *thakinma*'s room this morning and killed," I told her.

She nodded, fondling the infant, stroking its black shorn head. "They brought me the news this morning," she said. "It was the snake the *thakinma* let go."

"Why would you not come in to get compensation?" I enquired.

She had her old reply pat. "I was very much ashamed," she murmured. She would not meet my gaze.

"What was there to be ashamed of?" I demanded.

"It was not your fault that the snake escaped. The *thakinma* always promised to pay compensation for the snake that was lost. Look, I have brought the money." I pulled a bag from my pocket and counted out fifty rupees on the flooring. "Take them," I said.

She gave them a side glance, but let them lie, till the child reached out to clutch at the coins. On this she slapped his hands and pushed him from her, then, shyly, with her head on one side, she set to to pick the money up, piece by piece.

"Has the *thakin* sent this?" she asked, when there were only five rupees left on the split bamboo surface.

I nodded in the direction of Mindaung. "Of course the *thakin* pays, not I," I replied.

She pushed the five rupees daintily over towards me. We exchanged a glance, I was not in the least offended. I pushed the money carefully back with the toe of my boot. "I take no commission," I informed her. She picked the spurned coins up, and then for the first time looked at me with a glimmer of assurance. The passing of the hard cash had lulled suspicion.

I pointed to the tray in front of her. "For the snakes?" I enquired.

"For the snakes," and she held out a morsel of the flesh for my inspection. It was deer's meat, she told me. It appeared that they preferred that to anything else.

"That is not much food for four snakes," I said. She had a smile ready for my forgetfulness.

"There are only three snakes now," she replied. "One has been killed."

"To be sure, the one the *thakinma* allowed to escape," I said, and she waited a second or two before she nodded assent.

"Have you none but the four I saw the other day?" I asked.

"Those were all," she made answer.

"Then of course there are only three!" I exclaimed, and then I looked at my finger nails and went on, "I suppose they are all in the house."

"Aye, surely, they are all three there," she replied, pointing to a door in the matting wall, through which I had a glimpse of the now familiar snake baskets.

Now I knew that what she said was not true. Nagagyi had disappeared, and this morning's victim (might I call him Nagagyi's understudy?) was waiting in front of the rest house stable to be skinned, and two from four, if there was any virtue in arithmetic, was two, and not three. "Show the snakes to me," I said suddenly, rising to my feet, and, at my words, all her suspicions seemed to revive. However, she led me into the darkened inner chamber, where the baskets stood, ranged round the central house post; three with their lids on, one lidless and coverless, obviously empty; and lifted two of the lids and let me peer respectfully at the great beasts coiled up inside.

"And this one?" I enquired, pointing to the third lid, and knew I was getting "warm" by the way her hands went together.

"He is a very fierce one," she pleaded, touching the third basket with her foot. "I should be afraid to show him to your Honour."

I knew that the third lid was on for mere bluff. "I thought Nagagyi was the only really fierce one," I remarked with a grin.

"Nagagyi!" she repeated. It was the first intimation she had that I so much as knew the truant's name.

"Yes, Nagagyi," I insisted. "The one that escaped when the *thakinma* threw it down; the one I have paid for."

"As for the one that escaped——" she began. She looked at me sideways. She was trying to figure out how much I knew. "As for the one that escaped, it was, as your Honour says, called

Nagagyi," she admitted. "But this one is as dangerous as the—as the one that escaped."

"I wish to see it," I said. I looked her slowly up and down. "Ma Kin," I declared. "I think that third basket is empty."

She quailed before my eye. She knew I must have guessed a good deal. She was obstinate, nevertheless. "What I say is true," she persisted.

I was so certain that what she said was not true that I did what, believing her, untold gold would not have made me do. "Two from four is *not* three," I said to myself, and, stooping, deliberately raised the cover of the third basket, thereby coming, if I mistake not, a good deal nearer a violent end than I had come that morning in Mrs. Cavisham's bedroom. Up with the cover rose a shining banded neck, resentful of the stranger's hand. It was like lifting the lid of a Jack-in-the-box, with Jack's head pressing up all the time from below and threatening to flip out sideways. I doubt if the fangs missed my wrist by much more than an inch, and I believe I went as white as a sheet. I know I remembered my sins, and it may have been blushes for their number that helped to bring the blood to my cheeks again. I dropped the lid as it were a red hot saucepan cover, took one jump back, and was saved the ignominy of a second by finding Ma Kin between me and the basket. Over her brown bare shoulders I saw the deathly hood dart hither and thither, and could have sworn there was something like sloughed skin vibrating below the tight-drawn jaw. But it was the woman who filled the eye more than the snake. With her hands

she prevailed wonderfully ; with her thin supple imperious hands ; with them she wheedled him, fascinated him, till he succumbed and bowed his flat head to the yoke. And all the time her naked offspring stood unconcerned beside her, balancing himself against her hip, with his hand gripping a fold of her waistcloth, while he sucked at his maize and held his unwashed face almost within striking distance of the darting hood.

At last she made a half-turn towards me with the big head firm in her hand and, thinly radiant, held it out for me to examine. I thought I saw scraps of sloughed skin between her fingers, but the scaly neck and chin were bare as a vulture's. She had just seen to that while her back was turned to me.

"He is as vicious as Nagagyi, you see!" she exclaimed, a little breathlessly. "Bodaw. We call him Bodaw. You will notice that he is not Nagagyi," and, as she spoke, she moved her hand an inch or so to get a firmer grip, and there, on the yellow neck, just where her little thumb pressed, I saw the mark of Cain that told me that she lied.

CHAPTER XVIII

"**I**T was there! there! right under my bed when we saw it first," said Mrs. Cavisham, pointing with the spout of the tea pot, and, as the green and white purdah was up, we could feast our eyes on the scene of the tragedy without stirring from our chairs round the tea table in the verandah. "It was just after the ayah had opened the bath-room door to get my sponge. One of my shoes moved on the floor, just a little tap, like that; and we looked down, and the whole room seemed full of it. It might, for all I know, have been under the bed all night, but, I think it must have come in from the bathroom. One thing we know; it must have crept in or been put in some time after dark the evening before."

"Put in!" exclaimed Mr. Cavisham. "Why should you think it had been put in?"

"Why should I not think so?" she demanded. "That creepy yellow-faced baggage is capable of anything."

"My love!" he remonstrated. "Is it reasonable to suppose that these people would have hung about the place all day looking for the beast, only to put it, when they had found it, somewhere where they ran the risk of losing it a second time?"

"They knew they were sure enough of their compensation, whatever happened!" she retorted.

"Then why should they have wasted their time looking for the animal?" he enquired.

"How do you know either that they looked or that they wasted their time?" she demanded.

"Besides, revenge is sweet."

Hanbury held out his empty cup. It was for his benefit, fresh and perspiring from Ywathit, that the morning's horrors were being retailed. "Thanks, if there is any more," he said. "One lump, please. My sugar, is it? Then I'll have two. Look here, Mrs. Cavisham, was the bath-room door locked last night?"

"I don't know," she said. "The sweeper swears it was, but I doubt it. In any case, there was the window, close to the ground. She had only to put it in there."

"Well, there you are!" cried Hanbury. "But what do you mean by 'revenge is sweet.' What makes you——?"

"Well, considering how it escaped!" exclaimed Mrs. Cavisham.

"Exactly; how did it escape?" asked Hanbury. "You haven't told me yet."

"You haven't given me a chance," she retorted. "Why, she thought I dropped it on purpose on the top of her yesterday morning."

"You! her! who? Ma Kin?" he ejaculated, cup in hand.

"Yes," she replied. "That's how the silly thing got away. I threw it down near her, and the

idiots allowed it to slither off down the steps. They were frightened to touch it."

The cup stopped half way to his mouth. "What!" he cried. "You don't mean to say you were holding that beast, Mrs Cavisham?"

"In my hands," she assured him. "With its nasty little bits of fluffy skin tickling my fingers. And, if she had looked down her nose at you as she did at me, you'd have done the same."

"Same as what?" he demanded, and then, "well, all I can say is——"

"That it served me right, I suppose," she said.

"Well, it's a bit of a judgment, you know," he murmured. "You can't be surprised if—— I see, you think she found it again."

"Of course," said Mrs. Cavisham.

"And put it in to bite you," he went on.

"Exactly, and put it in to bite me," she said.

"Tut, tut! if that snake had been found yesterday, somebody *must* have known about it," cried Matthew.

"Oh, I daresay," sighed his wife resignedly, helping herself to the last bit of buttered toast.

"Of course we shall never know."

"You're surely not going to pay for the animal?" exclaimed Hanbury.

"Matthew wants to," she said. "It's absurd, of course, when by rights the fiends ought to be giving *me* compensation for shattered nerves. I want the skin, though, as a trophy; that is, as much of it as Mr. Chepstowe has left. I told you how he came in to look for it, didn't I, and nearly sliced me in half with a horrid knife he brought

with him before he made mincemeat of my snake ? I wonder he dares look me in the face now ! By the way, has the thing been skinned yet, Mr. Chepstowe ? ”

She had a smile for me. She spoke as though relations had never been strained between us ; as though I had never dreamt of leaving Mindaung.

“ They were well into the skinning when I came to tea just now,” I said. “ I’ll go and see if they have started with the arsenical soap yet.”

I was glad to escape from the tea table. Questions like that of compensation and the like were so bound up with my change of plans and the afternoon excursion to Pyogaung, from which I had just returned, that I was afraid lest subjects should suddenly be broached on which I had for the present nothing to say. The time for speech was not yet. Before I trotted my discoveries out I wished to be surer of my ground. A phrase of Mr. Cavisham’s sounded in my ears as I walked across the compound towards the stables : if the snake had been found, of course somebody must have known. I happened, by an odd chance, to have learnt something. Did anyone else know it ? If the truant had returned, some one beside the snake charmers must surely have seen or heard, and might, if I could come across him, tell me things ; not, of course, why another snake than Nagagyi had been chosen for Mrs. Cavisham’s bedroom, but enough to remove any doubt that might still be lingering as to the good faith of Ma Kin’s dealings.

And all the time Fate was guiding me—nudging

me, so to speak, with a providential elbow—into the presence of the very man I wanted.

I found the skinning finished. My Uriya had made quite a good job of the head and was pegging the skin out most professionally. Always a large-mouthed, amiable creature, I discovered him all one betel-dyed expanse of teeth, convulsed at some remark of his companion, an old, beady-eyed brown lizard of a Burman, who squatted with bare shoulders hunched and elbows on fleshless knees, watching the proceedings with interest. The waterman appeared quite a linguist; was, to my surprise, almost as proficient in Burmese as in his own vernacular, and as proud of his accomplishment as the elderly stranger seemed to be of his new silk head-cloth, yellow rosebuds on an emerald ground, which he removed, shook out and tied with elaborate care as I approached.

"I was laughing at the grandfather yonder," the waterman explained in reply to my query, wiping his merriment back with chocolate knuckles.

"What has the *pogyi* been saying?" I asked, but the Uriya would not commit himself, and it remained for the lean twinkling elder to explain shyly that the waterman had laughed at him because he had insisted on the dead snake's having been attracted to the rest house by the strange delicacies that were to be had for the taking—pig's flesh, young ducks, deer and egg curry, for instance. He dwelt lovingly on the savoury details. This, of course, was all exquisitely droll to the waterman, who, in his dual capacity of bath tender and dishwasher, knew the interior economy of the rest house

like the back of his brown hand. "Have I not told you, Saya Tu, that food is not kept in the rooms where the *thakinmas* sleep!" he interjected. However, the veteran was not to be shaken off his theory. The beast had been told that there was good food in the bungalow, he persisted, but she had not been informed exactly where, and had merely strayed into the wrong room by mistake. "Told! Told by whom?" I enquired, and why the deuce "she"? while the Uriya, who knew what was coming, smothered an anticipatory giggle. By whom, the old man explained, but by her friend, the snake who had escaped the day before, and had, till his recapture, consorted with her in the jungle.

The Uriya cackled at the suggestion of recapture. I pointed to the skin that lay, half pegged out in front of us. "You say that that is a wild snake, then?" I cried, and I was assured most emphatically that it was.

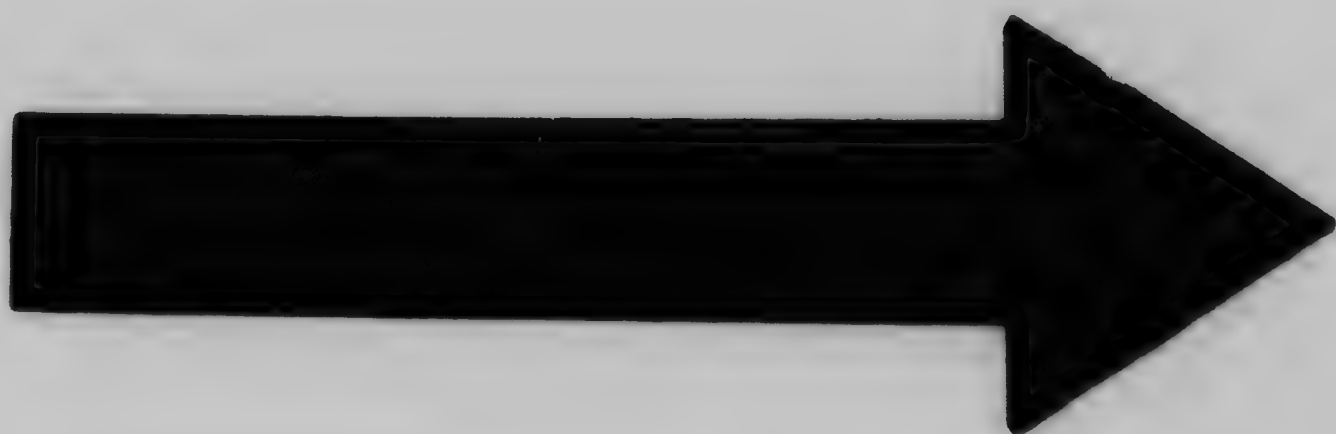
"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"Because," replied Saya Tu, "I saw the snake woman yesterday about sunset, sitting at the end of the plantain grove to the east of the village with the lost snake on the ground in front of her, and with a spear stuck into the ground at her side."

I added my note of incredulity to the waterman's. "And how, old man" I asked, "did you know it was the lost snake, and not one of the other three?"

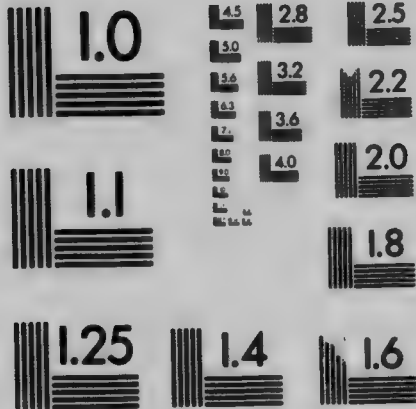
"Surely because of the small pieces of skin about his head," he made answer, moving his fingers illustratively round his own skinny neck.

I pointed to the hide at our feet. "And do you



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think that this snake had no loose pieces of skin about its head when it was killed ? " I asked.

He peered down critically. " I have seen none," he said.

" I nearly cut his head off with my *da*," I said. " May not I have shaved his whiskers off at the same time ? "

He cackled at the jest, as also, in duty bound, did the Uriya, but he still looked dubious. " Did you speak to her and ask her what snake it was and where she had found it ? " I enquired.

He rubbed his nose. " I was too frightened to speak to her," he admitted.

" How far off were you ? " I asked.

" About a call," he told me.

" And who was with you when you saw her ? " I went on.

" I was alone," he said. " It was close to the house where the charmers were stopping. No, no one else saw what I saw. How could they ? "

" Have you told anyone what you saw ? " I asked.

" I have told many," he replied. " But what is the good ? The village laughs when I say that this is not the snake that was lost."

" And so do I," said I. " And so does this *kala* here in whose country *mahauks* are as plentiful as flies. Put the thought away from you, old man. Remember, it is not wise to anger the snakes with vain stories. How can the beast that was killed be other than the beast that escaped ? See here ! I, who did the killing and saw the escape, should know."

He grinned at my admonition, scratching his threadbare top-knot with joined thumbs. " I

was frightened," he quavered, half to himself. "I was terribly frightened. We are all a little frightened of those snake charmers. It was for that reason that I did not speak to her." He sat on silent, but with twitching mouth, all through the application of the arsenical soap and assisted at the cutting open of the head and the examination of the fangs, sound death-dealing engines, if ever any were. Finally he begged one of the glands for medicinal purposes, and shambled away.

What with arsenic and snake venom, my hands called for a deal of cleaning when I got back to the tent. I washed slowly and carefully, and as I rubbed my fingers, I turned my facts over. Despite my barefaced quibbles, I had little doubt in my own mind but that the old man was right in thinking that it was the escaped snake that he had seen in Ma Kin's clutches the evening before. In fact, but for my visit to Pyogaung, knowing as I assuredly did, that the dead snake was not Nagagyi the whiskered, I might easily have become the patriarch's first convert. But if Nagagyi had come back and the dead trespasser had really been a stranger from the jungle, out after egg curry, why only three snakes in their baskets at Pyogaung, and what need for Ma Kin to present the recovered runaway to me under a name that I shrewdly suspected belonged of right to the beast I had just had skinned? There was trickery somewhere. It was as good as certain that Ma Kin, with Nagagyi recaptured, sure of her compensation (as Mrs. Cavisham had truly said), whatever happened, and thinking that the difference would not be noticed,

had risked losing a less picturesque member of the troupe on the chance of its giving Mrs. Cavisham in her bedroom or her bathroom at least a horrid fright.

A horrid fright! That was the very least, of course. What the very most might have been I did not like to think. I had hardly realized till then what a perniciously vindictive monkey trick it was that I had run to earth; and, the more I thought about it, the more I regretted the fifty rupees I had expended in buying the snake woman's confidence. She did not deserve a farthing. At the same time I could hardly help echoing Hanbury's deprecatory murmur. It *was* a judgment on Mrs. Cavisham. No one could gainsay it. It stood at tit for tat, and there, I was convinced, it would do best to stand. There was no need to aggravate matters by fresh disclosures.

One thing, nevertheless, was certain. The Cavishams ought to be got away from Min-daungmyo before further developments arose, as they well might if Mrs. Cavisham's suspicions got any support from my old man's tale or otherwise. I was not going to say all I knew, but there was no reason why the infatuated Matthew should not be told enough to make the necessity for going clear. Really, anything that would disillusion him would be a gain.

I stepped from the tent into the evening sunlight. Miss Cavisham and Hanbury were sitting together in a corner of the verandah. My young man's legs were up on his chair rests. Her head was close to his over a crumple of paper. His cigarette

smouldered unheeded by his elbow. Mrs. Cavisham appeared to have retired to her room. Mr. Cavisham's drooping figure was absent from its usual place by the paper littered table.

"Where's your father, Miss Cavisham?" I asked from the compound below.

She peered radiantly over the railing at me. "Finished the skinning?" she said. "What a mercy! Are you very piggy? What? Father? Where did he say he was going to, Mr. Hanbury?"

"Along the ridge," returned Hanbury. "He said something about going to pay for the snake."

"Pay for the snake?" I cried.

"Yes, he seems to have quite made up his mind to," said Hanbury. "The snake charmers have gone back to their village, apparently. Pyogaung, that's it. I remember now. That's where he's gone. Come up and look at these beads, Chepstowe."

"Has he been gone long?" I enquired.

"Oh, a quarter of an hour or so," answered Miss Cavisham. "He borrowed the dun to ride out. I hope you don't mind. Do come and look at the beads I've just bought."

"Not just now, thanks," I said. "I think I'll ride after your father. I expect I shall be able to catch him up." I turned to make a move for the stable. "I wish I had known he was going," I went on. "I might have saved him his ride. I've paid the beggars already."

"Have you? So sorry!" said Miss Cavisham. "You see, we didn't want to disturb you at your skinning. So very sorry!" Her head went down over those wonderful beads again.

And so it fell out that I had to take my pony into Pyogaung for the second time that afternoon. And, if the sober truth be told, I rather wanted to go. You may believe it or not, but I wished to see Ma Kin again. You may call it morbid fascination, if you like ; but there it was.

CHAPTER XIX

MR. CAVISHAM had made good use of his fifteen minutes start, and, though I took all that my chestnut would give me, there was never a flicker of dun stern or white pagri on the path ahead of me all the way to Pyogaung. The sun was close to setting as I drew rein at the village gate and shouldered my way through. The village cattle had all come in from their grazing grounds, and the dust of their arrival was still settling down golden over the tamarinds into the smoke of Pyogaung's evening meal. The watchhouse by the gate was empty; the old basket weaver had girt up his loins and shuffled to his supper, no doubt, and Pyogaung in the main seemed to have followed his example, for there were not many more of the residents in sight in the open between the thatched hovels than when I had visited the place four or five hours earlier. The lean-to cooking shed near Ma Kin's hut added its blue wreath to the common cloud, but Mr. Cavisham's pony did not stand hitched to Ma Kin's gate post, as I had expected to see it stand. A thin peevish crone peeped out of the shed at the sound of my approach, hitching her cloth and shading her eyes from the slant rays, and, on my enquiry whether

she had seen a *thakin* on horseback, screamed "San Baw!" to a man in Shan trousers who was chopping millet stalks in the rear of the house, and withdrew her vinegary presence behind the wall of matting.

San Baw approached through his maize plot, and I recognized in him the sturdiest member of the snake gang; quick as lightning, I remember, when it was a question of grabbing at swaying hoods, but slow of wit and grudging of speech. He knew nothing of a rider on a dun pony, though, when I described the rider, he immediately identified the most munificent of patrons, and, in his own heavy way, was interested. He had certainly not seen him since his own return from cutting wood in the jungle.

"Are you Ma Kin's husband?" I asked, and, though he only stared open-mouthed at me in reply, a couple of neighbours, whom my arrival had brought from their pumpkin patches to the party fence, promptly gave him credit for the distinction he, it seemed, would have been glad enough to disclaim. To have married ~~the~~ evidently meant in Pyogaung to have ~~gained~~ a notoriety half whimsical, half uncanny.

"Where is your wife?" I asked, and he gazed blankly round him. From the cook house came shrill promptings, and the sturdy one explained that his wife had gone into the jungle to look for bamboo rats. It seemed that she had left by the south gate, and I took it as just possible that Mr. Cavisham might have chanced upon her outside.

"Which way must I go to find her?" I asked, determined, if possible, to catch them before any

money passed. It took him some little time to come down to the mental level of the man who needed to be told where the village bamboo rat ground was. "She will be back directly," he muttered, and, at this juncture, while I wavered between going and staying, a shock-headed youth in a white loin-cloth who had slouched up, was prodded forward to tell me that he had just seen a foreign rider (he called him a *kala*, knowing no better) near the south gate as he came back with his cattle from grazing.

That decided me. "I will look for her at the south gate," I said. "If she should come back home before I return, tell her that I wish to speak to her." Then, just as I was turning my pony's head, it occurred to me to put a question or two to San Baw.

"Have you seen your wife this afternoon?" I asked.

"How can I have seen her?" he demanded. "It is but a betel chew since I got back from the jungle."

"Then know that I have paid her fifty rupees compensation for the snake the *thakinma* let go," I said.

This was news to him, as also was what I told him about a snake having been killed that same morning at the rest house; but he was not so dull as to fail to improve the occasion. "Fifty rupees!" he grumbled, pulling his fingers. "It was the most valuable snake of the four."

"What, Nagagyi?" I enquired, looking hard at him for symptoms.

"Eh, surely, Nagagyi," he made answer, a trifle

surprised, like his wife, that I knew the beast's name.

I was anxious to see how far he had been a party to the substitution. "But it was Bodaw that was lost," I objected.

He was bold enough to contradict me flatly. "It was Nagagyi, not Bodaw," he assured me. "Your Honour had your hand on him the moment before he escaped."

"Then Bodaw is over there, I suppose," I said, and pointed to the snake baskets, which had been brought down from the verandah above, and now stood near the foot of the ladder. He wagged his head at me in dull assent.

I fixed my eyes on him and kept pointing at the baskets. "Heh! show me Bodaw!" I cried. "Heh!" and so forceful was my scepticism that he shuffled across to the baskets and lifted the identical lid I had lifted to my cost a few hours earlier. What he saw inside gave him matter, I was pleased to observe, for some fervent head-scratching. He replaced the lid, and, as in a heavy dream, examined the contents of the other two baskets, and then peered round at me with his mouth open, as at a portent. Then he visited the first basket again, but got no comfort whatever from it. I turned my pony's head. I had seen enough to satisfy me that in that ugly matter of big Bodaw and the bathroom Ma Kin had been "on her own"; had, foolishly enough, not sought the connivance of her lord and master. More than ever I seemed to sniff feminine revenge in the business. I left the good man to the solution of his problem and rode off through the

south gate, refusing the offer of a guide. Then, bending to the left with the pathway, I found myself making into the level glory of the sunset, with all the evening cries of the jungle around me.

And now, but for that odd feeling that seemed to have driven me out to Pyogaung, I should have wondered how, in the name of all that was unexpected, old Cavisham, with his muddle head and his word or two of Burmese, had known how to find my lady of the snakes, for found her he had, as though by appointment. The sun, ready to dip behind the far purple of the Arakan ridges, was so full in my eyes that I was on the couple almost before I knew it ; yet, even so, I saw them before they saw me ; saw them, and had time to marvel at the picture the last red shafts showed me against the blue shadows of the bushes. He was still in the saddle, disproportionately long for his pigmy steed, huddled, drooping, in his drab jacket of Assam silk, like a large limp Don Quixote, with his eyes on hers. She had her back to the sandy track down which I came with noiseless hoofs, had her wistful tantalizing face turned up to him. She seemed to be talking to him—heaven knows in what language!—with a hand on his lank knee. At the first sound of my coming she turned quick black eyes upon me and then back again upon Matthew, giving him, as it were, a cue, and causing him to raise his head and look in my direction and pucker his brow in recognition and wave a foolish jaunty hand. I could almost have sworn that he was expecting me and had been waiting talking to Ma Kin till I chose to put in a laggard appearance.

I drew up alongside of him and dismounted. "So you've found her!" I said, and looked into Ma Kin's face and met her smile sourly enough.

He continued to gaze in rather vacant welcome at me. "Have you come to take me away?" he asked.

"I've come to find out if you've paid for the snake that was killed," I replied. "I ought to have told you at tea-time that I had already given this woman fifty rupees as compensation. I hope to goodness you have not been giving her anything more!"

What I had done seemed to have no interest for him. "More than—more than fifty rupees?" he murmured. For a moment he seemed to wander in a maze of doubt. "Now, what did I——?" he began. "Compensation? Yes, of course; that's what I came out for. For the snake, you know. Perhaps I ought to have told you. Yes, I've given her fifty rupees, not a penny more. That was what was arranged, was it not?" There came a moment of hesitation. "At least——" he faltered. He stopped to pass his hands over his eyes and to feel in his pocket to reassure himself. Then he faced me with quite a confident smile. "Of course, yes, I've paid her," he exclaimed. "Fifty rupees."

"I ought to have let you know before," said I. "I've already paid her fifty rupees for the snake, in her house, early this afternoon." I was determined to arrest his wandering faculties. "Paid her myself," I went on in a louder voice. "You went off just now before I knew, you see, or I should have

told you and saved you coming out to pay again. I'm sorry. Did she say nothing about my having already paid her?"

This time he did seem to take it in. The vapours were dissolving before my insistency. "Paid? You?" he cried. "No, she said nothing about your paying; at least, not that I remember. But bless me," he went on eagerly, "what does that matter? Expensive things snakes, you know; and we keep the skin, remember. Why shouldn't we make it a hundred rupees?"

"It seems to me that fifty rupees is ample," I observed drily, and turned to the snake woman. "Did the *thakin* give you fifty rupees?" I asked.

"He gave it," she said slowly.

"What was the money for?" I enquired, and she made reply "For the snake that was killed."

"For Nagagyi," I remarked cheerfully.

"For Nagagyi," she had to admit, looking at her feet.

"Good. And what did I give you fifty rupees for at midday?" I enquired.

Her hand had wandered away from Mr. Cavisham's knee. She tugged at the pony's mane and kept her eyes from the neighbourhood of mine.

"For the snake that was lost," she muttered, just as a sulky child might have done.

"Aha!" I said. "Then the snake that was lost was not the snake that was killed. If there are two snakes to pay for, then I have nothing to say," I informed her, and left it to her. If I had nothing to say, no more had she, at least she let close on half a minute pass without a syllable, while

Mr. Cavisham stroked his moustache and gazed hopefully at each of us in turn.

"Then the snake that was lost and the snake that was killed are not the same?" I said at last, having, I thought, given her time enough to select her line of defence.

She contradicted me with a restless movement of her feet. "Yes, they are the same," she murmured.

"Saya Tu says otherwise," I remarked.

She gave a half turn towards me. "Saya Tu?" she repeated. The name conveyed nothing to her.

"To be sure," I replied "Saya Tu; the old man who saw you yesterday evening, with a spear stuck in the ground beside you, holding a snake near the plantain grove to the east of Mindaungmyo."

She kept her face averted, and I lost a good deal that I ought, for the purposes of the game, to have seen, but I saw enough to show me that Saya Tu had a pair of eyes in his old head. "We have four snakes," she said swiftly.

"A snake with loose skin like a beard on his chin," I went on, just as though she had not interrupted me; and she had never a word to give me back. "And the scar of an old wound on the back of its neck," I added, drawing a long bow of my own at a venture, and bringing her eyes with a guilty jump up to my face. I rallied her with a gay little laugh. "Come, come," I said cheerfully. "You have only lost one snake. There has been some strange mistake. You must give me back that fifty rupees, Ma Kin."

She seemed to shrink towards Mr. Cavisham. "But the *thakin* said he would give a hundred

rupees just now," she muttered, with a glance up at him. It was the first hint I had that she had had any idea of what the good man had protested in English.

"Very well, let it be a hundred rupees," I cried, nodding amiably in response to Mr. Cavisham's puzzled glance of enquiry. "But remember, if it is to be a hundred rupees, I shall want that commission you offered me last time we met. My brokerage is fifty in a hundred."

She was too much of a Burman not to laugh, but her merriment was of her lips only. "The fifty rupees your Honour gave before is in the house," she pleaded. "How can I give you that?"

I was nothing if not accommodating. "Well, you can give me instead the fifty rupees that the *thakin* has just given you," I said.

And she did, sullenly; ten five rupee notes, all brand new, Mr. Cavisham frowning miserably the while. "It's all right; this is really my fifty rupees, not yours," I explained to him with a nod as I folded the little bundle together and thrust it into my pocket. "It was disgraceful her not telling you that I had already paid her," and the poor man sat dejected in his saddle, not daring to say me nay.

"That's all right," I said to the snake woman. "Now, Ma Kin, as you have given me my commission I shall act as *kozale* for you, and, if the *thakinma* wants to prosecute you, I shall tell her not to."

"Why should the *thakinma* want to prosecute me?" she faltered.

"For being so careless as to let Bodaw get into her bedroom and frighten her and nearly bite her,"

I remarked genially. "But you need have no fear," I concluded. "If she finds out, be sure that I will ask her to forgive you," and with this benignant undertaking on my lips, I climbed into my saddle, hoping that the set smile on my face would put Mr. Cavisham off the scent.

I could hardly get him away. She had him enmeshed. I watched him as he hovered round her in farewell like a big, brown-eyed puppy; feeling, let me now confess, something of what he felt; and was cynical enough to wonder whether, if I had arrived on the scene five minutes later, she would not have succeeded in persuading him that he had never parted with his fifty rupees. Honestly, seeing the hold she had over him, it would not have astonished me if she had. But he had no idea what I had been talking to her about, did not suspect what I knew. "You were a little hard on her," he said, as a turn in the path took him finally out of the range of her startled eyes; but he only referred to the way in which I had got back my fifty rupees. "Yes," he admitted, in reply to an ejaculation of mine. "Yes, she ought to have told me. But, after all, how was she to know that my money was not supplementary? We had nothing but my poor Burmese and her English to go on. I can't think how she made me understand as much as she did. She may actually have told me about your payment without my taking it in. Did she tell you she hadn't?"

"She never suggested that she had told you," I replied.

He puckered his brows ruefully. "You frightened

her, you know, Chepstowe," he said, "regularly frightened her. I could see by her face she had had a scare."

"It served her right," I growled. "Mind you, I don't say a hundred rupees is very exorbitant; and if only the wretched woman hadn't—hadn't——"

"Hadn't what?" he demanded, blinking through the twilight into my face; but, by the time the words were out of his mouth, I had made up my mind not to tell him everything; not just then, at any rate.

"You're very hard on her," he went on, plaintively. "Do you know, I can't be sure she didn't say something to me about another fifty rupees."

I could only shake my head and say, "I'm certain now that she couldn't have," thinking to myself, as I spoke, that, if I could get the Cavishams away from Mindaung within twenty-four hours, there was no reason why either of them should have any inkling of the whole truth.

And all the time I was wondering whether, if I had been alone, I should have made Ma Kin give me up that fifty rupees; whether, in fact, a third person arriving on the scene, while she and I were together, might not have found me like poor old Matthew all dazed and foolish, with my eyes glued to hers and a self-conscious grin for the disturber.

Somehow I am inclined to doubt from what I have seen of life whether there are many of the smug successful ones of this world who have really and truly learnt to realize where they would have been without the heaven-sent "awful examples" who have wriggled and postured and stumbled for their salvation.

CHAPTER XX

I HAD reckoned on getting the Cavishams away from Mindaung before another sunset, but, behold, twenty-four hours had come and gone, and they were still in the rest house, and the amusing thing, when I had got it fairly fixed, was, not that they were there still, but that I, who had as good as started for the plains, still lingered on in their company. The others were rooted and would not hear of moving, though I used my most plausible arguments on them. Mrs. Cavisham, far from being prostrated by her shock, had started a spirited water colour sketch of the green crest of the mountain, and could think of nothing but her picture while her colours lasted. She laughed at the idea of further trouble with the charmers. Mr. Cavisham, for his part, ventured to believe that he had discovered an unexploited Chin burial ground, talked of arrowheads and cinerary urns and was for having his meals sent out to him in the jungle. Meg Cavisham asked for nothing more than the presence of the long-legged Hanbury ; and, if Hanbury asked for anything more than Miss Cavisham, it was only when that young lady's stepmother took the trouble to be specially alluring.

Once or twice I tried to fathom my own feelings

and discover why I was lingering on, but, though I never succeeded in touching bottom, my failure brought me no nearer to a repacking of my trunks. Nor did my remaining seem any more unnatural than my threatened departure. After the last agitating forty-eight hours there was peace of a soft sultry kind, unruffled by Ma Kin and Ma Kin's runaways: the peace of hot air and chirping birds, of slowing rising tobacco smoke and dropped novels, of being roused, yawning, for meals, and relishing them disgustingly—precisely the holiday board-ship atmosphere I had come up prepared to revel in. The most disturbing incident of the morning following my double visit to Pyogaung was Mrs. Cavisham's running out of cobalt! At tea-time, when we were awake enough to talk, we talked in broken snatches of the chances of getting black partridge and of the earthenware pot that the ethnographer's labours had unearthed. The night passed, starlit and serene, and now another morning had come and we were as far from quitting Mindaung as ever. But the respite had given me confidence. Peace reigned. Suspicion did not stalk abroad, and, during the crisp half-hour that succeeded dawn, I seemed to see no self-respecting reason why she should stalk; why all should not remain quiet till the Cavishams were safely got away. After that, Mrs. Cavisham might think what she liked. Till then I was resolutely determined that what Ma Kin had done should (as it could) be at all costs kept from her.

And then, all at once, disquiet emerged in the

train of Maung Myit, who, like Hanbury, appeared to revolve round Mindaung, quitting it for a day or two, to reappear after a bustling circuit of the neighbouring villages. This stormy petrel had winged away to the plains the evening before the slaughter of the snake; now he was back again, to plague me, no doubt, with new conundrums, and almost at his first arrival Fate seemed to have thrown him across the path of old Sayu Tu, who had found in him an interested listener.

Near the village well stood a top-heavy *zayat* or traveller's shed, with old teak posts and a grey shingled roof, to which (as the rest house sheltered his betters) it was Maung Myit's custom to resort for lodging. My way on the morning in question took me past that battered structure, from which a small group of villagers had just detached itself; and, as I strolled by, with a critical eye for the holes in the village hedge, a brilliant apparition rose from a mat to greet me. It was the township officer. A flapping Shan hat and a dashing hunting crop allowed the village to see that he had ridden in from his last halting place. His brown boots and striped socks were powdered with the dust of miles of highway. His pony I could see being rubbed down in the background. I pulled up and addressed him, none too cordially, I fear.

"You're up again, are you?" I said.

"Just I come from Taungu sir," he began. "I have finished the enquiry on that side, and come to see if your Honour has any orders."

I might have reminded him that I was still on leave, but I did not. Instead I nodded in the direc-

tion of his departing visitors. "What are those men after?" I asked.

He fingered his mole. "I have been talking to an old man, sir," he said, and I had no need for him to tell me that the old man was Saya Tu, for I had recognized that elderly gossip's green and yellow headcloth on one of the retreating figures.

"What does he want?" I said.

"He has been telling me about the snake your Honour cut," he replied.

I drawled an uninspiring "Oh!" and waited.

He went on. "This old man reports he saw the escaped snake in Ma Kin's hand after the throwing. He says she must have found again in the plantain jungle to east of village fence. He asserts it is quite another snake your Honour has killed in the bungalow."

"How can it have been another snake?" I asked, coldly.

He seemed to be ready for as much scepticism as I. "How can?" he agreed. "But he is of opinion that one lover of the other snake comes into the bathroom to eat duck's eggs and so was killed."

I drew my eyebrows down and pointed rather fiercely at him with my stick. "You surely don't believe that rubbish!" I cried.

He fingered his hunting crop unhappily. "No, sir," he replied, "but I think Ma Kin knows of the placing of the snake in Mrs. Cavisham's room. Certainly it is not wild snake that your Honour cut. What I think that Ma Kin found the snake that is flown away, and afterwards placed in Mrs. Cavisham's room so that it shall bite her."

"Ma Kin!" I ejaculated, making, I flatter myself, a very plausible thing of my astonishment.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I suspect she will be turned out to be the guilty party."

"Rubbish! Maung Myit," I cried, falling back automatically on old Cavisham's ground. "Whatever should she do that for? Why the deuce should she risk losing the beast again?"

"But she wished to bring a case," he reminded me eagerly. "She was very revengeful. How can a snake come by itself into a lady's bathroom?"

"True, she wanted to bring a case," I admitted, "but I persuaded her not to bring one, and she said she would not."

"She is placing snake in bathroom instead," he returned, stoutly. He gazed round him warily, before he spoke again. "And I have heard Ma Kin seen that same evening near the bungalow when there was no light," he said.

"Who says that?" I asked.

"There is nothing certain," he explained. "But one syce see some person with a white jacket under the house posts during the dark. That is what the waterman of your Honour has said so."

This really was news and gave me something to think about. I turned it over for a moment, flicking the dust off my boots with the tip of my stick. At last I looked up at him. "I don't see how it will be possible for us to prove anything," I said, judicially. "Have you told Mr. Cavisham yet what the old man has said?"

He pointed towards the retreating figures, still visible near the village gate. "He has only just

gone," he reminded me. "There is no time to tell."

"Well, whatever you do, say nothing to him or to Mrs. Cavisham without letting me know first," I adjured him.

"I will not tell," he promised me. "But I may tell to Mr. Hanbury what the *pogyi* said. It is a suspicious police matter. It is not probable to have been a different snake. Does your Honour——?" he stopped to peer down at the volumes that lay piled on the flooring at his feet. "Does your Honour wish me to enquire into the matter?"

To have forbidden him would have been to court suspicion. At the same time I could have cursed the old fool's chattering and the young fool's officiousness. "The *pogyi* told me the same cock-and-bull story about a strange snake the other day," I remarked. "He talks as though there were a hamadryad in every patch of jungle. I purposely said nothing about it to Mr. and Mrs. Cavisham because I did not wish them to be frightened or get foolish ideas into their heads. Tell Mr. Hanbury what you suspect, if you like, but ask him not to mention it to anyone else till he has seen me," and I shouldered my stick and passed on, feeling that the morning had suddenly become overcast.

No one can say that my busybody allowed the grass to grow under his feet. Within an hour Hanbury was primed to the full with what Maung Myit had to give him, and you may imagine whether Hanbury took it up! It was a heaven-sent opportunity for the young man; the chance of chances, a full and ample justification for stopping on duty

among cherished surroundings. To those who, like myself, were "in the know," the air was redolent, all that forenoon, of secret inquisitions, full of the muffled voices of the Assistant Superintendent's police witnesses.

"There's something in the story, Chepstowe, you know," my friend informed me, stretching his eupeptic frame along an arm-chair at my side in the tent later in the day. "I've worried it out of that old bird, and he's positive about the snake he saw, ab-so-lutely. He's sure it was the one that did a bolt." He spread a big flat red hand and smote the thumb argumentatively. "Now, let's think it over," he said. "Let's take it he saw what he said he saw. What did that Jezebel do with the beast when she had got it back, eh? She didn't let it go again, I guess. Jolly well popped it back into its basket and thanked the Lord, of course, you'd say. Perhaps! Wait a bit. What's the alternative, now?" He tapped his first finger. "Here's a big devil of a snake found a few hours later in Mrs. Cavisham's bedroom. Look here, I understand that the beggar that escaped had bits of shed skin all about its gills."

"Nagagyi," I remarked.

"You've got him," he returned, nodding approvingly. "Well, so had the one that that old fossil saw Ma Kin holding out in the jungle. He's dead certain about that, oh, dead! Now, none of the others had bits of shed skin flapping around. That I remember myself at the *tamasha*. I expect you did too. How about the beast you did for, now? Did you see any shed skin about its head when you

tackled it? I've been looking at what's left, but there's nothing to show. The waterman saw no skin."

"No more did I," I said, "but you can't expect light flaky stuff like that to hang on long, especially if it's on a beast that has been——" (I peered up at my well-wiped Kachin *da*, wondering why ever I should bother to do all this for Ma Kin) "well, that has been knocked about at all."

"That's what Sayu Tu tells me you said to him," he grunted. "Then you think that the brute you killed was the brute that escaped?"

"The old man has got to show it wasn't, if he wants to be believed," I retorted.

"True, oh king!" he replied. "The old chap seemed to think that was about how you sized it up, and I won't say there isn't a good deal in it; still, look here, there's what the syce said he saw. There are no Burmese women in the compound. What the Moses does a Burmese woman want under the house after dark, eh?"

"If it *was* a Burmese woman," I interpolated.

"Ah, there you are! If it *was*!" he rejoined.

"Who's to say now, I should like to know?"

"I had heard nothing about the syce till Maung Myit mentioned it this morning," I observed. "Why didn't the fool speak up straight off?"

"Ah, why didn't he?" he cried. "Chepstowe, you're not a police officer, or you'd have asked yourself that question before."

"I've been a police officer," I reminded him.

"My mistake," he explained readily. "I'm always forgetting. Accounts for your looking at

it that way. Well, now, see here " (his fingers went up again). " If the snake people admit that Nagagyi—or whatever the beggar's name is—came back, if they—by the way, you saw them the other day. Did you ask them if they *had* got him back? "

" No," said I.

" Well, if they say he has come back, it's jolly well up to them to tell us what snake it was that you killed, eh? "

" Well, at any rate to show that it wasn't one of theirs," I put in.

He accepted my emendation. " That's about the size of it," he said, " though how the deuce they are going to do that beats me."

He scratched his head. It was not my mission to enlighten him. " Aha! " I laughed. " That's what you've got to work out, my boy! "

" Quite so," he admitted. My show all through! " And, if they say Nagagyi never came back to them——"

I finished his sentence for him. " Why, you've got to show that that's a lie," I remarked.

He made a half-turn in his chair towards me. " Yes, that's all very well," he grumbled, " but how? The old man's story won't carry us far, nor will that blooming syce's. Silly ass! Why didn't he speak before? "

" How? " I echoed. " By making them produce Nagagyi, of course," I said. " If he's there, you ought to be able to lay your hands on him."

" And how the devil are we to know which is Nagagyi, I should like to know, if he's got his fluff off? " he muttered, biting the back of his hand.

"That's where I'm stuck! What did they say exactly when you paid them the other day, Chepstowe? Can you remember? You say the woman tried to collar the cash twice over."

"Oh, that?" I said. "There was a misunderstanding. She certainly took two fifties, one from me and one from old Cavisham, but there was never anything cut and dried as to what she was to get. I took my fifty back from her, and the matter ended."

"And you didn't tell her anything about what old Saya Tu says, I suppose," he went on.

I looked at him very carefully as he lay. "Well, if you want to know, I did," I replied.

He cocked a half-incredulous eye at me. "By Jove! and what did she say?" he demanded.

"I don't know that she said anything," I made reply, and rubbed my pipe bowl.

"Did she look at all upset?" he enquired.

"I can't say she struck me as looking altogether happy," I admitted.

He was silent for a while, blowing smoke rings. "I believe there's something in what the old bird says," he murmured at last. "Take my word for it, that little black-eyed rip got Nagagyi back all right. If she denies it, we'll just have to prove it."

"And if she admits it?" I enquired.

"If she admits it she'll have to trot him out, and if she does, it will come to this that that old stick was right all through, and that the beggar you killed was just a little stranger from the jungle. Talk about giddy coincidences! I've never heard anything like it! Still, what are you to do?"

"What are you, indeed?" I muttered, drawing hard at my pipe.

"Unless, of course," he went on with his mouth screwed up under the stress of reasoning "unless, curse it, yes—unless we are to suppose that she put one of her other beastly snakes in instead, but——"

"But what?" I said.

"But I don't think we need consider that till everything else has petered out," he replied. He moved uneasily in his chair. "I wonder now," I heard him murmur, "if that old blighter is trying to pull our leg over this business. Confound it! my cheroot's out. Is it anywhere near tea-time, Chepstowe?"

He quite agreed that it would not do to tell the ladies, and left me wondering why the mischief I was troubling to screen Ma Kin like this.

CHAPTER XXI

FROM that moment onwards I felt that in the memorable matter of Ma Kin we visitors to Mindaung were arrayed in two opposing camps. On the one side stood Hanbury and Maung Myit, on the pounce, armed with all the terrors of the law, bent above all things (that was the mischief of it) on justifying by their activities their continued presence at Mindaung. On the other side hovered Mr. Cavisham and myself, anxious, as we should have fondly termed it, to "avoid a scandal." Behind the two official sleuth-hounds loomed the figure of Mrs. Cavisham, vengeful and unsparing, and I doubted whether we could definitely enlist Miss Cavisham on the side of peace and collusion. I was sure I could reckon on Mr. Cavisham, though somehow (in spite of what I had seen) not yet so sure on all points that I dared tell him everything I knew and everything I suspected. Needs must, however, that he should be given an outline, at any rate, of the case for the Crown, and to that end I sought him out in the cool of the evening at his labours at the Chin burial ground, the only place where I felt we could be safe from the ears of the hostile faction.

To the right of the track leading towards the summit, not far from the shrines of the tutelary *Nats* of

the mountain, where the hill face wound in folds of scrub jungle, I had already noticed a well-defined patch of bamboo, flat and green among the darker growth, which marked the site of an ancient clearing. Here the ethnologist's gropings had at last been rewarded. From afar the green showed up now freckled with the red of fresh burrowings, and here I found the enthusiast, tousled and unashamed among the bamboo stems, astride of a creditable mound of fresh earth, fondling a bone and a potsherd, while two dusty Burman coolies dallied with shovels close to him, waist deep in the hillside, waiting for his evening signal of release. He was hatless and coatless, bare to his wool-work braces. I rather think he had been digging himself. He held up his fragment of pottery triumphantly at me as I topped the neighbouring bushes.

"Another bit," he said. "It all points in one direction. I shouldn't be surprised, from what they tell me, if we came across some arrowheads presently."

"How many men have you got here?" I enquired.

"Two here, and two further down behind that clump," he said. "Sixpence a day each, and they tell me that in India I could get labour even cheaper than that! It's prodigious! Why can't I take a couple of these fellows back to England with me?"

"What's that bone?" I asked.

He held it up rather regretfully. "I'm afraid this *tibia* rather damages my theory that these particular Chins burnt their dead and buried their ashes in pots," he said. "It's not charred in any way, you see."

"In that case, chuck the wretched thing into the bushes," I said.

He eyed the object in his hand morosely, as though he would have been glad enough to act up to my counsel. He almost crooked his elbow. "After all, it's not conclusive," he murmured. "And it isn't as though I wasn't open to conviction." Then he looked at me. "Are the others coming?" he asked with a momentary gleam. He would have liked, I know, to show his wife and daughter his earth heaps, his grimy workmen, all the paraphernalia of his informed quest; yet he would have been the first to wonder had the family really appeared.

"No," I said. "I came alone. I wanted to have a word alone with you."

He looked at me again. "Ah!" he said, and I wondered if he guessed what was coming.

"About Ma Kin," I went on.

"Ma Kin," he repeated, slowly, and he put his cherished potsherd and his unconscionable bone down, and fumbled for his glasses, as he was wont to do when most in need of moral support.

"That snake——" I began, and in a moment he was all injured remonstrance.

"Now, Chepstowe," he cried, "you don't really think that she had anything to do with its getting into my wife's room! I don't like to think it of her, especially after I've paid her her money. My wife is—well, she's not quite fair to her, you know. She has some foolish idea that the woman wanted to prosecute her. Only this morning she raked the thing up again and talked of revenge and what not."

"Was that in consequence of anything anyone has told her recently?" I asked, quickly.

"Not that I know of," he replied. "Oh, no, I think not. Now, what do you think of it? Impossible. She couldn't have done it. Isn't that how it strikes you?"

I indulged in a dubious hum. "I certainly won't say it's impossible," I said.

He shook his grey head slowly at me. "Come, come, let's be reasonable," he said. "A snake escapes one morning in a building. Next morning it is found again in the same building. Why should there be any presumption that it has been tampered with in the interval?"

"Why should there be any presumption that it is the same snake?" I demanded.

He threw out his hand, with his glasses dangling. "My dear Chepstowe, you amaze me! A twelve foot hamadryad!"

"If we were in Limerick," I remarked, "we shouldn't be talking about presumptions; but we are in the land of snakes, remember."

"Then where does Ma Kin come in?" he asked, with a sudden exultant blinking. "You can't have it both ways, you know. Can she control the movements of every vagrant reptile in the neighbourhood?"

"Twelve foot hamadryads are not everyday objects even here, I admit," I said. "But we know where there are three more long gentlemen of the same kind."

He considered this new aspect with a wrinkling of the brows. "Ah, you mean that she may have

put one of her *other* snakes in the bathroom," he said.

"There is that possibility to be considered," I replied.

"Thinking, of course, that it would be mistaken for the one that escaped," he went on.

"Precisely," said I.

He puckered his mouth, immeasurably reassured. "Really, really, Chepstowe," he exclaimed, "I don't think we need give that possibility serious consideration. You must forgive me if I say that the theory strikes me as——"

"Preposterous?" I suggested.

"Ingenious," he corrected me gravely. "That it does more credit to your originality than to your discrimination. Why should she deliberately set about losing a second snake? She could not expect to be compensated for more than one. I see your views have been coloured by that most unfortunate double payment. You really must dismiss that incident altogether from your mind. The error, if anyone's, was mine."

"Ah, but suppose she had got the first snake back?" said I.

He waved me off. "Suppose! we can suppose anything, my dear Chepstowe," he assured me, "but where is there a scrap of evidence that anything of the kind has happened?"

I put my face a little closer to him. "There's an elderly party in the village," I said, "who is prepared to swear that he saw Ma Kin with the escaped snake in her possession the evening of the day it got away."

"The same evening? Indeed!" he said, and tapped his lower lip with his glasses. "And how did he know that it was the particular snake that had escaped?"

"By the shed skin round its head and neck," I replied, and he bowed to the efficacy of the test in a way that told of fuller knowledge than I had given him credit for. "There's a syce too," I went on, "who declares that on the night before the snake was killed, after dark, he saw what he swears was a Burmese woman in a white jacket lurking under the rest house."

"After dark?" he repeated.

"That's for what it's worth," I said. "Still, it all helps to make it look suspicious. Remember, I see no object in trying to bring the thing home to the woman. If we could prove her to have done anything, it would be very little more than what she would say Mrs. Cavisham tried to do to her. You see, it was most unfortunate that——"

He cut me short. "Most unfortunate," he agreed. "You are quite right. We don't want our dirty linen washed in public. Yet, I can't—I can't believe it of her."

"Mr. Cavisham," I said, with my eye on him as he stood and pulled at his lower lip. "May I suggest that you should get Mrs. Cavisham away from Mindaung before there is further trouble."

He looked up at me vacantly. "Trouble!" he echoed. "Are they trying to bring it home to the woman?"

"Both Hanbury and Maung Myit have got their knives into her, and don't look like letting the

matter drop," I told him. "And, of course, if Mrs. Cavisham gets to know what they know—You ought to get away from here, you know."

For one brief moment he seemed to agree. "Of course they must not——" he began. Then there crept over his face an expression I had not seen in it before, or if at all, then on that last occasion when I had watched him and the snake woman together in the jungle. It was a look of blank hungry obsession which suddenly made me wonder whether, after all, the poor man's passionate research work was not, at the moment, a refuge, a way of escape from something elemental and disquieting—in a way almost a penance, pursued relentlessly for the sake of the distraction it offered. The thought startled me by its nearness.

"Not yet!" he muttered, hoarsely. He gazed at me with an air of appeal that was helpless, as of one who cannot hope his interlocutor to enter into his feelings. And yet, as fate would have it, that was precisely what I was able to do, and in a moment it was given him to see it. "I can't, I simply can't!" he stammered, with a growing sense of my sympathy, and then strange to say, the more I showed I understood and felt with him, the more he seemed to shrink from me.

"You really ought to go," I said.

He turned upon me. "Why do you want to get rid of me?" he asked, deliberately, and I found I had no good reason to give. I was trying to answer the question for myself. He was almost right, very nearly justified in his misgivings, and I really believe that it was only the sight of his face of futile surrender

that saved me from justifying them. He was to be my "awful example," my effectual deterrent.

And, as we stood and faced each other over the mound of red loam, waiting for the next word, while the Burmans yawned and fingered their cheroot-ends behind us, casting long shadows over the ravaged earth and the wrecked bamboos, the unexpected happened. I saw him look, and dip to the ground, and pick up his treasured finds and hold them up a little ostentatiously and guiltily, and the movement made me aware of a white figure behind me, threading its way through the bamboo stems. Wonders will never cease, and we had a sharp reminder of the fact in the appearance of Mrs. Cavisham, escorted by an obsequious orderly with a cane, actually come to see her husband at his digging.

He began much as he had begun at my approach, using his hands a great deal. "Another bit, you see, Isabel!" he cried. "The place is full of pottery. I feel sure we shall come across some buried weapons soon. And look, a bone! I have had most flagrant overtures made me; Mr. Chepstowe has been deliberately instigating me to destroy valuable scientific evidence because it doesn't coincide with my views. Did you ever hear of anything so immoral?" He turned his smile upon me, drawing me into the conversation. I marvelled to see how quickly and smoothly he could drop back to his own fatuous level.

Neither Hanbury nor Miss Cavisham was with her. "More of that stuff!" was all she said at first. Her eye travelled. She glanced around her at the dug holes. "A bone! How very nasty!"

she ejaculated. "For goodness's sake, don't bring it near me!" She turned in my direction.

"I never expected to see you here, Mr. Chepstowe," she said.

"Indeed," I returned.

"Nor you either, Matthew," she went on.

I laughed. "And where would you have expected us to be?" I enquired.

She laughed back. Her answer came softly and disdainfully. "At Pyogaung, of course," she said.

CHAPTER XXII

AS a clerk, Maung Myit had always allowed his talents to shine with particular lustre on what we called the "judicial side" of his duties, and now, blossoming transitorily as a Myook, he clung to his old predilections. Toddy tree assessments left him cold ; agricultural advances were a thorn in his flesh ; as sub-accountant he had been a conspicuous failure, but, give him a legal point to nose through the Digests, and no Bengali could beat him at the game. I understand that he once sat (unsuccessfully) for the Pleadership examination. Above all he was a collector of catch-words. A Latin tag, indeed anything that decorated the printed page with thin lively italics, was a sheer delight, to be pondered over and mouthed, and dragged in, when occasion called, to buttress or to pulverize. You can picture how the niceties of Ma Kin's case appealed to him ; how the need for avoiding the pitfalls that yawned on every hand stimulated his fine brain. He could not get away from it, and he took good care that neither Hanbury nor I should. Armed with his authorities (but with no Ma Kin to carry them this time), he ran us to earth next day in the tent where we were recouping after some heavy meal or other, and, before we were fairly alive to

our peril, was deep in technicalities. Being, as I felt, there to watch the case in Ma Kin's interest, I forewent my nap, said nothing for once about being a gentleman at large, and heard him. Hanbury, moved by no corresponding sense of responsibility, and aware that, the more complicated the business the longer his sojourn at Mindaung would be, made no attempt to disguise the fact that he had just been asleep in his long arm-chair and intended to sleep again, if fortune favoured him, before his visitor left.

"As regards initiation of proceedings," that visitor began, after one or two abortive attempts to secure my companion's undivided attention, "in this case there is no complaint or information. Without complaint or information I think, sir, all action *ultra vires*."

I did not, as by rights I should have done, contest this highly disputable point. I basely made my young friend a present of it.

"Very well," I remarked amicably. "And who is to make the complaint?"

This was not precisely what he had expected. That he should have got so far so early in the day seemed to take his breath away a little. He sought counsel of his printed guides, but, finding in them no light or leading, he bit his thumb-nail reflectively.

"I am opinion, Mrs. Cavisham," he said, looking up at last.

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "You're not to tell her anything about it. Not a word, do you understand? I won't have it!"

He quite saw the force of it, I was glad to observe. "Mr. Cavisham, perhaps, sir," he suggested.

"Not an atom of good," I assured him. "He won't believe that Ma Kin has had any hand in the business. He will refuse to take any action."

"Will be no necessity to name Ma Kin in the complaint," he urged.

I thumped my knee. "I won't have it!" I repeated.

"Or, perhaps, Miss——" he ventured, but at this Hanbury stirred uneasily. "Complaint be blowed!" he grunted from his chair. "What do we want one for?"

"Cannot arrest without warrant," said Maung Myit, adjusting his orange head-cloth inflexibly.

"What do you mean?" demanded Hanbury. "The police can arrest that woman without a warrant. I was going into it with the inspector yesterday."

The township magistrate was very sure of his ground. "Section 284 non-cognizable, sir," he informed us.

"Don't talk rot!" ejaculated Hanbury. "I've looked it up. I'm sure it's cognizable. Go to blazes, Maung Myit!" He turned to woo slumber.

But Maung Myit stuck to his guns, reinforcing his assertion with all the weight of a Code. "Schedule II" he read, and ran his licked finger up and down.

Hanbury turned restlessly. "What are you talking about?" he cried in anguish. "What the devil is Section 284?"

Maung Myit read from his table with confidence.

"Section 284. Dealing with any poisonous substance so as to endanger human life. Shall not arrest without warrant."

Hanbury sat up and scratched his head, roused, against his will, to an unwelcome vigil. "I thought it was worded differently," he growled. "Dash it all! You can't call a snake a poisonous substance, can you, Chepstowe?"

"But snake's body a poisonous body or substance," protested Maung Myit. "And Ma Kin dealing with body of snake. There is a ruling of the Judicial Commissioner——"

"Does it say 'body'?" asked Hanbury, who had no palate for the legal subtleties of the Indian Penal Code.

"I think we can get rather nearer to it than that," I remarked.

"I'm sure I've got nearer myself," groaned Hanbury. "Why, it's attempt to murder! Besides, there's a section about looking after animals. Dog bites another chap—you know. Give me that beastly Code, Maung Myit. I wish I had that inspector here! Here you are! Section 289. 'Person omitting to take order with any animal in his possession so as to guard against danger. May arrest without warrant.' Look at it!"

The township magistrate did not need to be reminded of the section. "Omit to take order with animal. But, sir, that section is not applying, because no order has been given how to deal with that snake."

"Take order, not give order," I cried.

"If your Honour is giving order, Ma Kin is

taking order," was his reply. "But I think that no order has been given," and Hanbury, feeling that all this was above his head, threw himself back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"Besides," went on our hair-splitter, "if the snake comes in the bathroom, it is no longer in Ma Kin's possession, it is become *res nullius*."

"Then your point is that the snake that was killed was not the snake that got away, but a wild one," said I.

"No, sir, the same snake," he replied. "But put in, not lurked in from the jungle."

"Put in! Then how the deuce can it be *res nullius*?" I demanded.

"*Res nullius* when it left the jurisdiction of Ma Kin," he explained with the injured raised brows of one brought up against a block of wilful obtuseness. "Perhaps your Honour has seen in the Selected Judgments——"

"Have you ever made sure that it is the same snake?" I asked, and he jerked his glance away from me to Hanbury as a reminder that anything so coarse and concrete as the step I hinted at fell wholly outside the cultured domain of law. Hanbury lay like a log, with his face upturned to the tent roof, and I went on. "If you haven't, may I suggest that, before doing anything else, you should make quite sure that it is the same?"

"If your Honour orders——" said Maung Myit. He broke off, and his anxious eyes sought Hanbury again, but Hanbury might, for all the interest he displayed, have been dead. There was a short silence. Maung Myit cleared his throat.

"It should be investigated by the police," he remarked, a little censoriously, and Hanbury appeared to wake to a mood of happy acquiescence.

"What I've been saying all along," he cried, with a cheerful note. "I wish you wouldn't rush us like this, Maung Myit. We'll straighten it out if we're given reasonable time. Tell you what, I'll go out to Pyogaung this evening and make sure. I'll get them to trot all their snakes out; identify the whole crowd. Three miles, isn't it, and a good road? The inspector has gone back, so I can't take him with me, but you might come, Maung Myit, and we'll tackle the business together, eh?"

"Very well, sir, this evening," said Maung Myit, collecting his books, and, turning a wavering glance towards me, "Your Honour——" he suggested.

"Well," I said.

"If your Honour could come too," he murmured.

"What the——!" I began, and continued, rather sarcastically. "Maung Myit, would it be too much to ask you to remember a little fact that I have tried to impress upon you once or twice before, that is, that I'm on leave; privilege leave; a month's privilege leave, Maung Myit. Officers on a month's privilege leave are not usually asked to assist at police investigations."

The township magistrate twiddled his waistcloth with contrite fingers. "No *locus standi*," he crooned apologetically, as one who has, a moment too late, found that he has committed a horribly patent indiscretion.

"Quite so," I returned, and having thus sternly

vindicated my independence, I was ready with a graceful concession. "If I happen to be riding out that way this evening," I said, "I'll meet you at Pyogaung and see how the thing is going."

"I understand, sir. *Amicus curiae*," murmured Maung Myit, in a moment of happy inspiration, and bowed himself out.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN point of fact, I would not, for fifty rupees, have missed being present when the snake charmers were harried, and so I eschewed tea, took good care to be tit-tupping lightly in the direction of Pyogaung about the time that Hanbury and Maung Myit were in transit, and allowed myself to be caught up by them just outside the village gate with as much of an affectation of spontaneity as I could compass. "As I did, after all, happen to be going your way . . ." I explained, and was not slow to note that Hanbury would rather not have had me there. He thought I should be too critical of his Burmese, I know. He had made a frightfully official matter of it all by bringing a constable in uniform with him. I have a kind of idea there were handcuffs somewhere in the background. There certainly were plenty of brass buttons in the foreground, for the young gentleman was himself in khaki, donned, I think, largely for Miss Cavisham's benefit at tea-time. I only hoped he had not, over the tea cups, given the ladies an inkling of what his grim objective that evening was. In a silly way it was so much on my mind that I believe I could have voiced this hope if I had had an opportunity ; but I had none.

He had been nursing a grievance all the way, and came out with it the instant I joined him. It was that I had been too generous with my information to the snake woman.

"Lord, I wish you hadn't told her what that old chap Saya Tu says, Chepstowe!" he muttered as we passed in single file through the crank timber gate flaps and saw the village wake, and raise itself, and peer at our pattering cavalcade.

To which I replied "If I hadn't told her, some one else would have. The whole of Mindaung knows the old rascal's story by now."

"Mindaung isn't Pyogaung," he grumbled. "I'd have given a good deal to hear what she would have said before she was told his story," and he gave me a meaning side-glance, just as though he had divined that I had had the privilege he coveted.

I looked straight out between my pony's ears towards the low verandah of the snake charmer's hovel, already in sight, with Ma Kin's black head showing over the rim. "I don't suppose Saya Tu's yarn will make much difference to her," I observed, with my mind going back to that midday when, in the same verandah, I had lifted a basket lid with surprising results. "She'll stick to it that, whatever snake it was the old boy saw, it wasn't the one that escaped."

"She'll try to bluff us, you think?" he said.

"That's about the size of it," I returned; but here I was entirely wrong. I had, when last at Pyogaung, cast seed on fertile ground. What I had let drop about Saya Tu had been absorbed and profited by and built round. Nor, on the whole,

was I sorry. There was all the more fun provided for the disinterested looker-on. Ma Kin and San Baw were both at home, as well as the acid aunt who had scowled at me at my last visit, and a colourless, pock-marked brother, whom those concerned agreed in relegating to the background. I can see them now, all crouching apprehensively round the paddy pounder as we alighted from our ponies: San Baw tugging down his tucked loin-cloth in the presence of authority; the pitted youth lumping his coarse black top-knot together, for we had disturbed the aunt in the middle of a head-hunt. They all looked so unhappy that I could only hope, for their own sakes, that they regarded their case as one worth careful working up. And yet that case, as it unfolded itself, did not strike me as being at all convincing.

The village headman was away, but his son and deputy hurried up, a little short of breath, and two village elders were fetched—protesting softly, but comforting themselves with betel—to represent local interests. Somebody brought a cane-bottomed chair for me, but this was not, in any sense, my investigation, so I took the paddy pounder instead and passed the chair on to Hanbury, who threw away his cigarette, stretched out his puttied legs, and, helped, when his vocabulary halted, by Maung Myit, commenced his questioning. How, to begin with, he wished to know, about the snake that San Baw had so carelessly allowed to escape in the rest house, to the great peril of the lady visitors?—He rubbed the poor man's enormity in!—Had the thing a name, and, if so, what was

that name? What were its sex, its distinguishing marks, its reputation for ferocity or otherwise? Had its fangs been drawn, and, if not, why not? In fine, he let him understand that he had come to be told all that was to be told about the beast, or very much to know the reason why. He glowered ruddily on the snake charmers, mopping his forehead, and they, with one accord, cut the ground from under his feet by allowing that the animal was known as Nagagyi.

I was at first amazed at this capitulation. Had they, as Ma Kin had done at first, contended that it was Bodaw that had escaped and Bodaw that had been killed and paid for, they might, I believed, have defied the police to prove the contrary. Who was there, save myself, to contradict them? Why should it not have been one of her other snakes that Saya Tu saw Ma Kin handling? And presently I began to discern that it was precisely because I was there, ominous, on the paddy pounder, that the game of bluff had not been played. I knew too much. I was aware of the scar on Nagagyi's neck. I had elicited San Baw's previous admissions that time when I had made him gape over his snake baskets. My knowledge had to be met by another line of defence, and so the Bodaw theory went down the wind. If only the poor wretches had known my attitude of benevolent detachment!

"To be sure, Nagagyi," said Hanbury, and hummed and hawed to cover some feverish brain cudgelling. "Eh? What, Maung Myit? Yes, now, the day after Nagagyi escaped, a snake was

found and killed in the rest house. You've heard? Was that snake Nagagyi?"

San Baw was all ready with his muttered negative.

"No?" cried Hanbury. "What snake was it, then? Tell me," and Maung Myit, perched near the steps, with hunting crop and Shan hat, threw in a gratuitous "Speak, jungle dog!"

"What snake?" San Baw's eyes sought mine, as it were in mute protest at being thus called upon to account for all promiscuous vermin that might ramble into the Mindaung rest house. He opened his mouth to bluster, to prevaricate, but before he could speak, Hanbury, not to be kept from his next vital question, wobbled swiftly off. "If that was not Nagagyi, where is Nagagyi now?" he demanded. "Has he been found again?" and Maung Myit groaned audibly at this iniquitous leading question.

San Baw nodded in the direction of the house. "He is there," he made reply.

"You got him back, then?" said Hanbury.

"We got him back," confessed the snake man.

"Then what Saya Tu says is true!" cried Hanbury, exactly as if the old man's story had been produced and canvassed.

"We got him back," repeated San Baw, leaving Saya Tu severely alone.

"Why did you not say so before, stupid one?" clamoured the inquisitor.

"Because I was frightened," returned the snake man.

I thoroughly enjoyed hearing Hanbury and

Maung Myit bellow approbriously "*Amele!*" in unison as at something wholly abnormal and unexpected, and eye each other with a glance which as good as said that the corroboration of Saya Tu's story in this discredited quarter had shorn the narrative of half its worth.

I thought it was time for me to speak. "Suppose you tell him to show us the beast, Hanbury," I interpolated, and Hanbury gave orders accordingly. San Baw and the brother dragged one of the baskets forward, and in a moment Nagagyi had raised his crest accommodatingly for all to see. He was in fine fighting fettle, and we amateurs were quite content to yield precedence and give him a wide berth. Even the pock-marked relative, who distinctly had a way with serpents, was inclined to be ceremonious with him. And now, for the first time, I saw why Hanbury had been at pains to fetch a constable in his train. The fellow was a native of Pyogaung; knew the snakes by sight and name, and was able to bear independent testimony to its being the veritable Nagagyi who flickered before us. Like a sensible person he ignored the absence of sloughed skin, to which Maung Myit was at first disposed to attach importance, and made for the only really vital test of recognition, to wit, the scar on the head. That satisfied him fully, and he swaggered back to hold the ponies with grunts of confirmation. Not that his evidence was really needed, however. Both the headman's son and the village elders knew the snake with the old wound on its neck as Nagagyi, and Saya Tu's credit was restored.

The snake charmers seemed to breathe more freely, but they had their eyes on me. They were not out of the wood yet. Somehow, every one seemed to have his eye on me, to want to know what I thought of it all. I had suggested the production of the snake. What had I to say now that it had been produced?

What I actually had to say now concerned Ma Kin and not San Baw. "So that is Nagagyi, is it?" I observed, addressing her, professing a genial admiration for the scalp hood. "Do you know, I thought at first that it was Bodaw!" and at the word "Bodaw," I saw a faint flutter run through the squatting group and had to keep myself from laughing as I remembered the name our long friend in the basket had borne when last we met. "But he is like Bodaw, is he not?" I went on, in a sudden spirit of impish malice, and, at Ma Kin's quick muttered denial and swift supplicating glance, I opened my mouth, glancing in the direction of the remaining baskets and trying to look as though I were about to say "Let me see Bodaw, then." I watched their faces the while. I doubt whether they could really have been more alarmed if I had said the fateful words. I did not say them. It came over me all at once that I was a beast to torture the woman thus, whatever she might have done. "Of course it is Nagagyi," I said, affecting to examine the reptile closer, though I could not help adding mischievously, "I can't think how I mistook him for Bodaw. The two are so totally different," and Ma Kin grovelled behind the basket, even now not quite sure whether I meant to be merciful or not. I left

her on the rack just a moment longer, then I made a sign to show that I was entirely satisfied, and the identification was on all hands recognized as complete.

But what did it all mean? Hanbury tried to turn it over, from force of habit tugging at his upper lip, without the solace of a moustache for his fingers.

"Well, if that's really the snake that got away, I don't see what else we have to do," he said in English, looking at me from over his big hand.

I returned his scrutiny pensively. It was not for me, surely, to say what he was or was not to do. I gave him a cheery little nod, just the kind of nod that an interested spectator on a month's privilege leave would be likely to have given him. He sought counsel in Maung Myit's flat face and thought he had discovered what he wanted.

"That old man was right about their having found the beast again," he remarked for our edification. "I hardly believed him, you know, but he was right, right as rain, absolutely. Pon my word! Why shouldn't he be right too about the snake that was killed being a wild one? What? There must be wild ones about. Queer yarn, you'll say—but—why shouldn't he be correct, eh? You know these old Burmans. They often do know a thing or two you'd never dream of. Anyhow, these beggars here will swear till all's blue that they know nothing whatever about the brute that was killed, and what I want to know is, how the deuce we are to prove they do!"

Maung Myit looked sage. "They will un-

doubtedly make a shilly-shally statement," he opined, with his eyes on the tip of his hunting crop, and, just at the moment when, watching the game delightedly, I began to wonder whether the duffers were going to make anything of it after all, Hanbury had a spasm, and asked in Burmese "How many snakes have they?"

An officious elder grunted and spat, and said "four," with his mouth full of betel, and proceeded to give their names; Nagagyi and Bodaw and Byaing and Thwethauk, as distinctly as his clogged palate would allow, and Hanbury began to look about him and make as though he had only been waiting to discuss this further aspect of things till he had satisfied himself that Saya Tu's story was true. He puffed his cheeks out. "Well, before we go any further, let's have a look at the whole boiling," he exclaimed, and, at his words, I saw that the snake charmers were in a parlous position, and, being, if you will remember, on a month's privilege leave, permitted myself as a private citizen to be truly sorry for them, especially as it was what I had said about Bodaw that had, so far as I could see, started this fresh trouble.

The "whole boiling" was accordingly produced, but, alas, no juggling or manipulation by Ma Kin's nimble fingers could bring its total up to more than three. Nagagyi was there, and Byaing was there, with a neck (sure enough) the image of a paddy bird's. Thwethauk, stood up like a gentleman when his lid was taken off, and looked, every inch of him, the blood-sucker that he was. In happier circumstances I am sure Ma Kin

would have enjoyed telling us how the sulky yellow giants had earned their nicknames, but now she squatted mum, for Bodaw, the fourth of the dread quartet, was not. His basket, opened reluctantly and last, was empty, or, to be precise, was tenanted merely by a drowsy mongoose, who scorned publicity, and did not pretend to come into any category. Hanbury glared round him triumphantly when the count of heads had been taken. The elders, anxious to put an end to the business and to get to their suppers, called testily for the production of the missing snake, but all to no purpose. Now, if ever, I was satisfied that what had been done to Bodaw had been done by Ma Kin and Ma Kin alone, for San Baw wriggled unblushingly away from under the burden of proof. The scowl he shot at his wife, as he rasped his bare brown ribs with his knuckles, said "You have got us into this plaguy mess, woman, and you must just get us out!" and the pock-marked brother was just as unmerciful.

"Where is Bodaw?" thundered Hanbury.

She gave me a quick gaze of entreaty and looked down. "He has escaped," she stammered, with her eyes on the ground. "He escaped after Nagagyi did."

"How did he escape?" asked Hanbury.

There was a longish silence, broken only by the unconscionable mongoose, who was scratching himself fretfully in Bodaw's basket. At last a faint voice came up from where Ma Kin sat and trembled. "I put him into the jungle to call Nagagyi," it said.

"How was he to call Nagagyi?" demanded the two inquisitors with one voice

The snake woman would not raise her eyes. "They were like elder and younger brother together," she murmured. "I knew they would seek each other out if they were at large at the same time, so I fed Bodaw well and bade him go out into the jungle and fetch the other one to me to be fed in like fashion on lizard's meat."

Her voice faded away rather than ended. There was another pause. Hanbury and Maung Myit faced each other gaping. I saw one of the village elders look at the other gravely and frame a sentence with his red-smeared lips. His companion nodded, and the veteran (I thought I recognized in him the old basket weaver of the gate) turned to Ma Kin and spoke.

"Did you tie a clapper to his tail?" he asked.

"I tied no clapper," the snake woman confessed.

"No clapper!" The two grey heads inclined towards each other. There passed a glance, a pitying glance. Comment was an empty superfluity. The woman was a fool. Let her bear the consequences of her folly! Thus the grizzled ancients, masticating their betel judicially.

"And he never came back?" cried Maung Myit, his voice found again.

"He sent Nagagyi to get the lizard's meat," said Ma Kin, "but he did not come back himself."

"And it was he, Bodaw, that was killed the next morning in the rest house?"

Ma Kin was circumspect; would not commit herself. "I have not seen the body yet," she murmured.

San Baw, thinking, no doubt, of the compensation, cried out sharply "It was Bodaw!"

He was sorry he had spoken, for Hanbury's reply was as quick as it was injudicious, "It was Bodaw certainly, and he was put into the rest house to bite the *thakinma*!"

"He went in of himself, I had nothing to do with it!" wailed Ma Kin.

San Baw, having profited, was dumb.

It was now the turn of Hanbury and Maung Myit to exchange meaning glances. The two took murmured counsel together, dropping Burmese for a more cultured medium. "Tommy rot, I call it!" I heard Hanbury ejaculate below his breath. "Does she imagine we're going to let her pull our leg like that? What do you think of it, Maung Myit? All my eye, isn't it?"

But it would seem that Maung Myit was not so sceptical. He was clearly impressed, was Maung Myit. It was foolish to ignore the fact that the minds of these rude snake charmers moved on a different plane to the civilized man's; and so, though he muttered "This sort of statement is of no good for any weight. They are flimsy indeed," with his next breath qualified this by adding, "They are always thinking Tommy rot, sir, but undoubtedly *bona fide*." A moment later, however, he had a pang of doubt. "There is the statement of the syce concerning he has seen under the house posts," he exclaimed.

"Ah—yes—that chap," said Hanbury. "Well—" and I gathered from the way his drawl tailed off that the chap in question had, on closer exam-

ination, not proved the very fount of truth undefiled. "That syce. Yes—well—if there's nothing more than what *he* says——"

Maung Myit rubbed his nose with the handle of his hunting crop. "These people have very strange customs," he allowed. "They are almost same as Chins, sir. I have heard that sometimes when——"

"I daresay," said Hanbury. "But, look here, we can't stand this! The yarn's extraordinary enough as it is. Why does she keep it back and trot it out only now, I should like to know. Why the—I wish you'd ask her, Maung Myit. Pitch it hot, will you? Ask her why the devil she didn't tell us all this before. It's most suspicious!"

As though Ma Kin could tell us! The question was put with the proper ferocious trimmings that were beyond Hanbury's Burmese, and all the woman could do was to seek my eye and signal dumbly to me for help. "This story is not for you," her look seemed to tell me. "You know better. I don't expect to take you in with anything so foolish, but don't betray me! You promised to be my *kozale*. For pity's sake, act like a good *kozale*, and see me through!"

Her whispered justification could be barely heard. "Frightened!" boomed Hanbury, catching the stock phrase that fluttered on the thin lips, hardly daring to emerge. "What were you frightened of?" and from all sides; from the elders, from Maung Myit, even from the head man's son, who had barely opened his mouth till then, rang the insistent question "Heh! What was there to be frightened of?"

It was at this supreme moment, while Ma Kin

hung her head and plucked at her waist-cloth, quite capable of confessing the whole wretched business, that I chose to step in, stilling the clamour with my uplifted cane. "She was frightened of losing her compensation, of course!" I said deliberately in Burmese, and they all looked at me.

"I gave this woman fifty rupees for Nagagyi," I went on, with a devastating frown for my victim. "And never once did she tell me that she had got Nagagyi back and that the snake I was paying for was one she had lost through her own carelessness. That was so, was it not? Heh!" and I turned on the snake woman.

For a second she met my glare open-mouthed, then she seemed to catch at and fasten on my words. "I was very much ashamed! I was very much ashamed!" she cried. "The *thakin* promised a reward!" There was ineffable protest in her wail, but through it all I could feel that she knew I was "seeing her through."

Hanbury was rubbing his ear fiercely. "But, good heavens, she did lose a snake!" he exclaimed, and I was quick to sweep the gathering film of doubt aside.

"My dear chap, that's the point," I said. "If you'd been here when the money passed, you'd have seen that I made it quite clear that it was the snake that Mrs. Cavisham let go that I was paying for, not for any snake this woman might have been idiotic enough to let go afterwards. She knew I should give her nothing if I was told the truth."

He gaped at me. "The truth! Then you do

believe her story!" he cried, his face full of the marvel of it.

I was not going to tell him whether I believed the story or not. "What I mean to say is that she was taking the money under false pretences," I persisted quickly. "It shows why she wanted to keep her story back. It explains everything, it seems to me."

"Everything!" he exclaimed, staring. "Well, all I can say, then, is that she has a beastly tender conscience!" He still rubbed his ear. The way I brought my theories out evidently impressed him. "Of course," he murmured "if you really——"

"That's how it strikes me," I said with a shrug. "Not that what strikes me matters to anybody," I hastened to add. "Of course it's no business of mine now. I merely spoke because I happened to be the person who paid her and knew what was said when she got the money. It's there for what it's worth. Worry it out, my sons."

And with that I rose from my paddy pounder, much as though I had been a witness who had given his evidence and was now expected to withdraw. It suited my book to appear just a little piqued. It gave me an excuse for getting away before I seared my conscience deeper. What, really and truly, was it to me whether the woman's story was true or not, whether her mute appeal had really meant all I had read into it? After all, this (as I have already endeavoured more than once to explain) was not in any sense, my show. I had merely dropped in as a spectator. I could surely allow these good people who were not on a month's

privilege leave to solve their problem in their own way and earn their pay and travelling allowance.

I lit a cigarette and took a turn round San Baw's compound, examining his maize, which was indifferent, and his pumpkins, which were quite fair. I went and patted the ponies and spoke to them and loosened their girths and saw that all was well with them. Then I extended my stroll, and made a show of examining the village hedge, with an eye to the time when I should have resumed the reins of office. The sun went down, and, sinking, left blood-red ripples on a smooth flood of saffron and turquoise. As though at a given signal a bevy of trilling cicadas burst unseen and with one accord into melody. If we were to get home in time for dinner, it behoved us to make a move.

There was a limpid half light on everything when I rejoined the group at the steps of Ma Kin's house. Heaven only knows what the dear good creatures had been talking about in my absence. I take it that there had been some hard swearing. Ma Kin had been read a lesson, I expect, on the sin of double dealing, San Baw had, no doubt, had a few home-truths told him, and I should have been surprised if the thin aunt and the spotted brother had got off quite scot free. As I drew near I could hear Maung Myit summing up the case for the benefit of the head-man's son and the wearied village elders. In Burmese the rascal turned his phrases quite nicely. He might have been charging a jury. There was a suspicion, he gave them to understand, nothing more, mark you! nothing more; still a distinct suspicion that the snake that I had killed had been put in the bath-room by some evilly-disposed person, for purposes,

probably malicious, of his (or her) own. They had to consider whether that suspicion could, in the light of any of the statements elicited, be looked upon as having grown into certainty. They had heard what the woman had to say. They had grown grey with much study of men and matters. Did they place any credence in her singular story? Singular no doubt, it was. He would not insult them by suggesting that they, veterans of weight and discretion, would have done anything so foolish themselves; still, had they considered the workings of the minds of these wild uncultured snake charmers? Had they realized what silly jungly acts they were capable of? How, in fine, did it all strike them? If it came to the point, would they advise the police to arrest the woman or not, and if so, then for what offence?

This direct appeal for advice to the old men was not at all what Hanbury had asked for. He cleared his throat, horrified; he pulled at his lip. He would have interrupted if Maung Myit had used fewer Pali words and he had been a little surer of his ground. However, in the end he did nothing. Where there was so great a cloud of doubt there could be no great harm in taking local opinion. It was some kind of test, at any rate, as to whether there was likely to be a conviction. He preserved his silence to the end. We all waited for the old men's reply.

I have the picture still before me, the last I have been able to carry away from that day's happenings: the thatched roofs gleaming in the salmon-pink flush of evening; the flat calm haze shrouding the encompassing trees; by the steps, the group of

crouching snake charmers, shuffling their feet, waiting for the verdict; the ponies stamping, half invisible, in the gloom beyond the fence; to their right a cluster of wide-eyed curious villagers, spectral in the shadow, kept back more or less out of earshot by the inexorable constable, but following everything with hushed expectancy; in front, on a bamboo mat, just touched by the fading glow, their grizzled top-knots bowed judicially, the village fathers on whose lips we hung—I took it all in as Ma Kin's fate trembled in the balance.

The oldest inhabitant rid himself of his last obstructive morsel of betel, cleared his throat and spoke, conscious that all eyes, if not all ears, were upon him and that all hearts must go with him in his exposition. "I am of opinion," the pronouncement ran, "as regards this matter which is being enquired into by the police, that, inasmuch as Ma Kin, when letting her snake loose in the jungle, tied no clapper to its tail, and thus took no reasonable precautions to ensure its recovery, she should not be allowed full compensation for its loss. Let her return half of the fifty rupees that was paid her by the *thakin*, and let it be given to Saya Tu, herbalist, resident of Mindaungmyo, as a reward for the information he has given in this case."

And so—for the sense of the meeting was that ripe wisdom should prevail—it came about that we rode home again through the darkening shadows and the trill of the cicadas, to Mindaung and dinner, without having arrested Ma Kin for putting Bodaw in at the *thakinma's* bathroom window.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT was foolish of Hanbury, I thought, to tell the ladies at dinner, what had taken him away to Pyogaung, and how the thing had, to use his phrase, "petered out." The matter would have been better kept from them; but the young ruffian could no more parry questions than fly with wings. The whole business had to come out, and absurd enough it showed, looked at in the dry light of Mrs. Cavisham's comments. If that lady had not always failed so of backing in her attacks upon Ma Kin, she would certainly have been even more scathing on the subject of the snake charmer's escape from justice. But she was in a hopeless minority, for, even if Miss Cavisham found it hard to swallow Ma Kin's touching tale of confidence misplaced, she nevertheless took her cue from her father, and seemed as glad as he that Hanbury's handcuffs had not been used. Not that Mr. Cavisham was altogether satisfied. I think he rather resented not having been told. He would have given a good deal to have been there.

When his wife asked point-blank, "But, you wretched people, if you believed her story, why did you make her disgorge half her fifty rupees?" he threw in a mild protest of his own, fingering the coins that Hanbury had just handed him across the white cloth.

" You shouldn't have done it, you know, Hanbury. It was a matter between her and me entirely. I must make it good to her again, I really must ! "

Of course Hanbury was ready with his justification. " Local opinion, you know, " he said. " They think a lot of what these old busters think. Besides, she had to be taught a lesson ! "

Whereupon Mrs. Cavisham was moved to throw back a lace sleeve, and lift her glass of port, and murmur " A lesson ! What lesson ? To invent a little more artistically, perhaps ! " and to add, as she tasted her wine " Why, after all, *should* she have bothered to think of anything really plausible with only men to deal with ? "

She might, as I have said, have laid her sarcasm on even thicker, but I think she refrained from saying everything she might have said partly for the sake of Hanbury, who, in his clean white mess jacket, looking wonderfully fresh and bronzed and ingenuous, asked hard to be taken at his own valuation. He attracted her specially this evening, as I could see by the way in which she appropriated him after dinner, for purposes of her own, which entailed a soft-footed promenade in the dark up and down the village road in front of the rest house gate, while I sat indoors with Miss Cavisham and her father, and played some interminable kind of card game that Hanbury had been teaching us, and chafed at the order of things.

It was absurd that I should be under the punkah and Hanbury under the stars. Every time the half furtive footsteps passed near the end of the verandah and the voices dropped as though at a signal given

Miss Cavisham and I had to avoid each other's eyes. Even old Cavisham began to notice it at last, it was so very flagrant. I had the same feeling of irritation gathering within me as when, a few days before, I had stood with Mrs. Cavisham in the gloaming by the gate and told her I could not trust her with Hanbury. And still the tiresome game went on. We dealt, we gathered up and sorted our cards; we sipped our long drinks; we wrestled with a somewhat abstruse system of scoring—and all the time the footsteps outside in the balmy night passed and repassed. It was not till nearly ten o'clock that I was able to do anything. I forget what particular point the game had reached; but a complication arose which arrested us temporarily, a problem that none of us three could solve; and I remember the sense of rescue that enfolded us as we sat and faced each other, in the absence of our expert, and were able truthfully to say "Look here, we positively must ask Mr. Hanbury!"

I came slowly down the steps and passed through the compound gate just as my couple, looming white through the darkness, reached it, and, at sight of me, halted. "Hanbury," I said, "we're stuck. Will you take my hand and tell Miss Cavisham what happens when—well, they'll show you the cards and you'll understand. Eh? And if Mrs. Cavisham doesn't want to go in just yet, perhaps she'll let me do sentry-go outside with her for a bit."

I looked not at him but at Mrs. Cavisham. I knew that if she had had enough of him, she would let

him go ; and apparently he had begun to pall a little, for she only laughed resignedly when he in turn looked to her for orders ; and a moment later I found myself pacing along through the gloom at her side, with the sense that, antagonistic as the pair of us were, we understood astonishingly much of each other's mind. The laugh she gave, as, above us in the verandah, we heard Hanbury's welcome and saw the punkah flap into fresh life, seemed to be a reminder of our last communing in the gloom and a challenge to me to take things up where we had left them then.

"Don't look at me so reproachfully," she began, on the same militant note as of old, dispelling my first vague fancy that she might perhaps all the time have been talking to Hanbury about Miss Cavisham, helping the girl's cause on. "I told him twice to go in and take a hand, but he wouldn't."

"I've no doubt you did your best," I observed, drily.

"Yes, I did ; my very best !" she retorted, "so you needn't glare at me like that !"

"I'm not glaring," I protested, though, even as I spoke, I saw I must have been glaring in the most absurd way, but not at her. The look had been meant for Hanbury, who had proved himself so pig-headed in refusing to leave Mrs. Cavisham's side ; and, following sharp on the knowledge that there was no need to glare, now that Hanbury was gone, came the feeling that to take things up just where we had left them those few nights before had suddenly become impossible.

And it had become impossible, I could see, just

by virtue of all that had intervened ; all that train of encounters (I can give them no less hostile a name), throbbing, explosive and inspiring, that had brought us closer and closer and ever closer together into a kind of fierce communion ; memories of quick hands piling disordered hair, of passionate resentful eyes fixing me from a background of tent flaps or battered bamboo stems ; all, in a way, overlaid by one outstanding vision of leaping coils of snake in a darkened chamber, of a lilac dressing-gown, spattered with gore, and of white lips that twitched and tried to smile, and had nothing kinder to say to me at a supreme moment than " You blood-thirsty creature, you nearly murdered me ! " It was the cumulative force of all this that had made her, for me, a new woman ; she was a new Mrs. Cavisham ; new and yet old ; old as Eve and Delilah and Cleopatra in allurements, defiance and disdain, new in her strange nearness. It was not *her* whom I had refused to trust with Hanbury. It was not even she who had asked me why I could not see that she was safe with him. As I looked at her successor, moving wonderfully through the dark at my side, I knew I could trust her with him, trust her at all times and in all places. It was not *that* that had brought me out of the rest house to her. All had so changed for me in the interval that now the vital question was, not whether I could trust her with him, but whether I could trust myself with her.

" You *are* glaring ! " she said.

" Well, at any rate it's not at you," I laughed.

" I'll take your word for it that you tried to make him

go in. I don't want to talk about Mr. Hanbury. I want very much to talk about something else."

"About Ma Kin, I suppose," she scoffed.

It was as much as she could do to hide her surprise when I said "Yes."

"What about her?" she asked.

"I want you to persuade Mr. Cavendish to leave Mindaung," I said.

"And why?" she demanded.

"I think you know," I returned, deliberately. "You heard what he said at dinner-time about making good that twenty-five rupees Hanbury took from her to-day. I don't want him to do that; or anything else foolish."

"Not do anything foolish!" she cried. "You don't know my dear Matthew, Mr. Chepstow."

"She's not good for him," I went on, as though she had not spoken. "It's—it's—if you had only seen them together, as I have. It's—well, it's like a snake and a bird. By Jove, Mrs. Cavendish, she has learnt the trick! You ought to get him away!"

"But when can I see her again?" she asked.

"He can go out to Pangaung again, any time," I remarked. "Isn't that exactly what you yourself thought he had done yesterday? Out at the Chin graveyard. You said so, anyway."

"Did I?" she laughed. "Yes, of course I did. But, was I likely to have meant it? I mean with you there with him."

"You spoke as though you expected me to have gone too!" I returned.

"Naturally!" she exclaimed. "To look after him,

just as you're looking after me!" and she seemed to breathe a sign into the darkness. "Good heavens, how you do look after us!" she murmured.

This was somewhat of a new light on me and my doings. "Don't you want me to look after him?" I demanded, a little sharply.

To this her reply, well-weighed, apparently, but not very obvious, was "Poor old dear! why shouldn't he have his innings too?"

This puzzled me. I looked round slowly at her as she stepped beside me. "Too?" I said. "Does that mean as well as you? Do you consider you're having an innings?"

"So far as you will let me!" was her retort. "I mean I'm having it when you're not looking after me too hard," she laughed. "Perhaps I might put it the other way round. If he goes on like that, shouldn't I have my innings?" She tried to read my face as though to see whether I followed her. Then she went on, "I really don't know why I'm coming to you like this, Mr. Chestowe, but, honestly, don't you think my having my innings is as good a way of dealing with him as your idea of taking him away from Mindaung from that woman? Don't you think it will bring him to his senses?"

"What will bring him to his senses?" I asked.

"Why, this," she made answer. "Just this." She seemed to appeal to the night and the hour and for a brief space we stood side by side and seemed to drink it all in. The stars in their courses kept vigil overhead. Away in the village a drum murmured and throbbed like a fierce heart-beat heard from

near, and there came the faint clash of barbaric music to stir the blood. There must have been some rustic revel forward behind the belt of tamarind trees. The only earthly light that reached us through the gloom was in the rest house verandah, faint and steady, just enough to show us how we were hidden in the blackness. As she spoke, a nearer sound clove the stillness; a rough barnyard chuckle and a hoarse call.

She gave a little start. "What was that?" she asked.

"A tucktoo," I replied. "Listen, there it is again. One of those big house lizards, you know. You've seen them crawling about the rafters, haven't you?"

"Never," she answered. "But how absurdly like a cuckoo!"

"They say they are lucky to have about a house," I observed. "Count how many times he calls," and, standing together in the dark, we counted thirteen "tuck-toos" tailing off into a final gruff "t-r-r-r-r-r-r!"

"Thirteen," she said. "That must mean a bit of bad luck for some one. But what," she added "is the good of talking about good and bad luck? Such is life! What's a piece of luck for one is generally bound to be a nasty knock for—for the other party." And then she went back to pick up a dropped thread, speaking softly. "But, come now, don't you think it will bring him to his senses?"

"What! all this?" I allowed myself a dubious murmur. I could see what "all this" meant. I remembered the hushed promenade while we were

at our card game. I found I was being called upon to look at a picture of Hanbury, clean, florid, white-jacketed Hanbury, being used, in the seductive thrill of this tropic night, to wean a wayward Matthew from his leanings in the direction of a certain yellow-faced baggage. The whole thing struck me as being grimly humorous, not the least comical feature being the way she was taking me behind the scenes. "It may," I laughed, "but don't you think it a bit drastic? That sort of thing can very easily go too far, can't it?"

I saw her white hands go up impatiently. "Oh! if you think of the—the *risk*!" she exclaimed.

"My dear lady, won't it be infinitely simpler just to get him away from Mindaung and her?" I asked.

"Of course, of course, if you think only of the risk!" she repeated scornfully.

"Good heavens, we've got to think of her too!" I exclaimed.

"Her!" she echoed.

"Not Ma Kin," I said. "I mean Miss Cavisham."

"Her!" she said. "I don't see—There's no question of thinking of her."

"Exactly," I exclaimed, flaring up a little on behalf of my Madonna. "And there ought to be!"

She looked at me dumbly for a moment. She seemed slow to grasp my point of view. "Of course there ought to be," she murmured at last. "What am I talking about?" Then she added, with a sigh, "We'd better be going in again," but, before we had taken more than three or four steps toward the rest house, she burst out afresh. "Why do you want us

to go away just as we're beginning to be happy? Why are you so horrid, so puritanical?"

"Puritanical?" I echoed.

"Yes, puritanical," she repeated. "Disapproving of everything I say and do! If only you wouldn't bother your head about Matthew! Why shouldn't the poor old boy have a good time? Why shouldn't we all have a good time? You, I, everybody."

"I don't know why you should always think I disapprove of you," I cried, testily. "Have your innings, as you call it, if you want to. Heaven knows, I'm not responsible for your actions!"

She had a laugh for this, clasping her hands behind her neck as she walked. "No, that's just it," she cried. "You're afraid to be. Responsible! Heavens! what a life you would lead me if you were! Don't talk about it."

"Well, what *do* you want to do?" I cried, exasperated.

"I don't know that I want to do anything now," she retorted. "I did want to have my innings, but you wouldn't hear of it. You're nasty, puritanical, horrid!"

We turned finally toward the rest house. I had let my cheroot go out, and stopped to light it. "Mrs. Cavisham," I said grimly, thinking of Hanbury the weak-kneed, "I expect you'll have your innings all the same whether I want it or not."

"If I have it, it will be because you won't be responsible for me," she returned, and I snorted impatiently as we moved on.

"Don't laugh," she said. "You would find me amenable enough if you ever did make yourself

responsible. You've no idea how amenable I *can* be, I'd—" she hesitated, and then came out with it—" I'd do anything you wanted me to."

"Anything!" I echoed.

"Yes, any mortal thing," she replied, and faced me. "Anything you fancy. Isn't that nice of me? Now, won't you help me?"

"Of course I'll help you," I assured her.

"To bring him to his senses?" she said.

"Yes, to bring him to his senses," I rejoined.

"How?" she asked, softly.

"By helping you to get your husband to leave Mindaung," I said. And then, as she stood silent, I added "You said you would do anything I wanted you to."

"Anything except that," she returned.

"That's not a very good beginning," I remarked.

"Oh, don't talk of beginnings!" she cried impatiently. "We're not beginning anything. We're just leaving off! Have we been out here a frightful time? It feels centuries. There they are on the verandah looking out for us. They must have finished their game."

We drew near to the bungalow, and as we approached, the irrepressible tucktoo raised his hoarse voice again, this time clearly from somewhere in the roof of the rest house. If there was anything in the myth of good fortune attendant on his call, we might have fancied him croaking out his benediction over the three who leaned sociably side by side on the verandah rail, silhouetted against the white glare, trying to pierce the outside gloom.

"Seven times," said my companion a little bitterly. "That ought to be good luck for some one in the rest house."

"Which of course probably means bad luck for us out here in the cold together," I remarked.

"Together?" she repeated, as though we had really been miles asunder, and the look she gave me, with the first touch of lamplight on her face, stamped me as the sour-visaged, steeple-hatted puritan whom she had refused to admit into any kind of intimacy. I did not mind the look. It positively was rather reassuring to feel that she regarded me as separate and self-righteous and strait-laced. Curiously enough, there came back to me, as she spoke, a phrase I remember her to have used at Padu before we left, that hot day when, among the palm trees on the river's bank, she had accused me of being frightened of her. "Oh, the comfort of it!" she had said then; and somehow, now, out in the dark there, I knew for the first time, what she meant. It did give me a feeling of safety to be set apart in my austerity like this. If she was going to take me thus, I need not harbour that silly fear I had just felt as to whether I could trust myself with her. If there was no chance of her reading foolish things into what I said and did, there was no cause for me to tread so very circumspectly. "Oh, the comfort of it!" I said (of course strictly to myself), as we passed from the outer darkness into the light of the verandah, and, wrapped in the comfort of it, I retired in due course, to bed.

CHAPTER XXV

I DOUBT whether I have ever lived through a duller couple of days than the two following, which, for my sins, I spent sitting, like a jaded recording angel, over Mr. Cavisham in the dust of his digging, watching lest he should play truant and fly off to Ma Kin. It was my own fault, no doubt, that I was bored. I know now that the four or five messy fragments that were the net result of the scholar's labours were destined to afford matter for more than one thoughtful paper on "Some aspects of Chin Sepulture," but mine, alas, was not the eye of faith, and I must confess that at the time I found the grimed objects neither sustaining nor suggestive, and was glad enough when the work of desecration was complete and I could convoy Mr. Cavisham back to the rest house—past the turning off to Pyogaung.

Somehow, at Mindaung, things seemed to come, so far as I was concerned, in rushes, and it was thus quite in tune with tradition that, after this ditch-water interlude, there should arrive, on the top of the news of Hanbury's engagement to Miss Cavisham, a message to say that the snake charmers were due at Mindaung that same evening on their way to performances at Nyaungbin and Padu. The second

intimation acted as an antidote to the first, rousing me from sentimental ponderings to a plan of campaign. There were, though, it is true, a few fine stimulating things about the first. The impression that a stranger would have formed at the scene when, coyly, after breakfast, Miss Cavisham, with her eyelids fluttering furiously, asked me to figure how happy she was, and Hanbury put in a hoarse shamefaced claim to be the only person who really was in a position to be congratulated; the idea that this stranger would probably have carried away was that the whole business had been delicately engineered by Mrs. Cavisham, to whom the sole credit for the happy issue was due. If there was any suggestion that things could have shaped less auspiciously, it was only to be inferred from Mrs. Cavisham's veiled references to what might have occurred if she had not been generous enough to keep herself in hand. As it was, her smile for Hanbury and the way in which she exclaimed "I took you into the family long ago!" seemed just to give the proper maternal touch to their past relations, and she clearly looked to me to be applauded for this her supreme act of renunciation.

Old Cavisham, with his mind withdrawn by the great event from dangerous topics, was superbly and unaffectedly happy. "An excellent young fellow," he drew me aside to murmur on the first fit occasion. "If he gets into the Commission, you know, there's no saying where it will all end. Perhaps I have not told you, Chepstowe, that we do know something of Sir Edgar, through a cousin of his. I hadn't really thought of using my letter

of introduction, but I must, of course, make an effort now, when I get back to Rangoon." At this point he cut himself short and eyed me hesitatingly. That the captain of his cherished pearl should leave me unmoved, was, of course, for him out of the question. He was anxious to see how I was bearing up, would have liked, if this were possible, to take my razors away. "We old chaps, you know—" he ventured, clearing his throat and wondering whether that was my particular balm. He watched my face intently, I remember; ready, if it helped me, to sink the twenty years difference and treat me as a hoary contemporary. He was so sorry for me that he actually brought up the old "bridesmaid" quip that I hoped everybody had forgotten. "What am I talking about, though! It will be your turn soon, I suppose," he remarked, with a sudden genial pucker, finding himself on surer ground. "There was some talk of a young lady, was there not? Ha, ha! . . . By the way, you know these things. Should one write to the private secretary or to the A.D.C. for an interview?"

I appreciated his tenderness, and made my resignation plain. I was not, of course, wholly unaffected. You will never believe it, after what I have laid bare, but I doubt honestly whether I had ever quite withdrawn myself from the jostling company of "other men"—"boys" perhaps I ought to say—whom, it may be remembered, I pictured as waiting with me to see if Hanbury were really going to come up to the scratch; but, now that the thing was done, I was not, on the whole, sorry to turn my mature

back on the alien crew, who frankly wearied me with their callow prepossessions, and to think of grown-up things. If I was going to regret anyone, let it, by all means, be Miss Meredith, who at any rate would keep me off disturbing thoughts, and so I brooded, indomitably, over that other pair of quivering eyelids—till the news about Ma Kin brought me up short.

I had hoped that heathen bones and Christian betrothal would have kept the scholar's mind also off disturbing thoughts for a time, but something told me, as the day wore on, that by some side wind he had got my second item of news. It was the way in which he would stop his walk and furrow his brow, and, as it were, snuff the breeze, with his eyes on the waving plantain tops beyond the compound fence; perhaps more than anything else his manner of jingling the money in his pockets, arms almost elbow deep. He had his rupees all ready I could feel, for the great event. If it had only been the twenty-five rupees down with and done with it, I should not have stirred a finger, but I had it in my bones that it was not going to end there, and so I kept a watchful eye on the restless creature. And here, to my surprise, I found Mrs. Cavisham helping me unasked. As once before, she took her husband and his concerns for several critical hours wholly in hand. If, for my cussedness, she were destined not to have a "good time," no more, please heaven, should he. That was how she looked at it, I conceive. It was just what was wanted, however. The warm afternoon swallowed Hanbury and Miss Cavisham up. We were not to expect them back till they chose to

reappear ! Mrs. Cavisham for the first time put on her habit for real business, and, trusting herself to the docile dun, took her husband for quite a long excursion, by some instinct (for her geography was vague) selecting an objective that lay directly in the opposite direction to Pyogaung. I owe it, I now know, to her exertions that I was alone in the tent when in the cool of a long evening, Ma Kin descended upon the compound.

She was hunting for the sympathetic Matthew, I could see. In the enemy's camp, too ! I wonder she dared ! If Mrs. Cavisham had seen her there would have been trouble, she knew, and Hanbury would have given her short shrift. As for myself—well, upon my word, I hardly knew in what light she regarded me. I had made her give up fifty rupees, but she had quite recognized the elements of rough justice in my demand. I had been partly responsible, too, for the taking of the half of her remaining fifty. On the other hand I had helped her out, for some inexplicable reason, when things were at their blackest. I had held my tongue when a word would have meant the lock-up at Ywathit for her. Her face told me nothing when, finally, in answer to a call from my long arm-chair, her finger tips met and she moved towards me. She might have been letting my opening words decide whether I was to be dealt with as friend or foe. I had been strangely kind once. Who knew that I might not be again ?

I had noticed her first loitering among the carts that were drawn up beyond the cook house. She had been making enquiries there, and, as a result,

was stepping, with an air of meek discomfiture, towards the gate ; in fact, was almost through it when the sound of my voice caused her to turn and direct her steps toward the tent.

" Heh ! what have you come for ? " I asked.

She was dressed for the occasion, I observed, in white jacket and shimmering petticoat ; sported pink buds and tinsel in her sleek black hair coils ; brought the pungent smell of sandal wood with her. She was far happier in her finery than in her untrammelled, bare-shouldered, work-a-day dress. She seemed to be shaking her shot silks at me ; had ends of primrose coloured scarf to smooth down over her knees with her brown fingers as she spoke and used her eyes.

" We are passing through only, on our way to Nyaungbin," she said.

She found a mat near the tent door and rustled down upon it like some fresh coloured tropical bird. The manner of her studied aloofness was meant as a reminder that on the last occasion she had sat, by invitation, a good deal closer to me. She was waiting for the invitation to be renewed, but I let her stop on by the entrance. Once was quite enough. Besides I had my " awful example " before my eyes.

" When do you go to Nyaungbin ? " I asked.

" To-morrow," she replied. " San Baw and the snakes leave Pyogaung to-morrow morning at daylight. I have come on ahead."

" To see the *thakin*, I suppose," I said.

She had already settled that it was no use throwing dust in my eyes. " The *thakin* promised to give me fifty rupees, and I only have twenty-five," she pleaded.

"Why do you trouble the *thakin*?" I demanded, with some warmth. "I suppose you want to get back the twenty-five the Assistant Superintendent took away from you the other day?"

"It was unlawful taking!" she wailed, with her elbows up and out. "It was the *thakin* who gave me the money!"

"The *thakin* has got it back by now," I informed her. "The Assistant Superintendent made it over to him after he had taken it from you."

She only half believed me. "I wish to report the matter to the *thakin*," she said.

I gave a big laugh. "To report the matter!" I cried. "Know then that the *thakin* is with the *thakinma* now. Do you think she will allow him to give you back the money? Do you think she does not know who put Bodaw into her bathroom?"

She had her own ideas on the subject, but she was persistent, nevertheless. "I wish to report to him," she whispered. "It was the *thakin's* money."

I looked her up and down, cogitating a way out for us all. She was quite content to sit and let her presence sink in and prevail over me. Her joined beseeching hands seemed to rise and fall in time with my eyes. I could almost imagine them weaving a web about me. Every minute I allowed her to sit there told in her favour. She was to the last degree appealing, no doubt, the little slender Jezebel. She had a way of carrying one with her. It was precisely her drooping pitiful air that had made me pat her on the shoulder not so very long ago. I remembered, and blushed, and began to see, as it came back, that all the past trouble had somehow

grown out of that mute friendly motion. If I had not patted Ma Kin, Mrs. Cavisham would not have kicked her. If she had not been kicked, Ma Kin would certainly not have put a snake where it could bite Mrs. Cavisham, and we should have been saved a deal of pother. An amazing lot to have grown out of that ill-advised demonstration! The responsibility almost took my breath away, and I was seized with a sudden fierce desire to get rid of the woman, who was only waiting to be patted again, confident that, given time, she could sway me just as she swayed poor old Matthew. I was obsessed with the idea that the Cavishams might be back at any moment. It would be too humiliatingly absurd if I were discovered with the woman a second time! I was not going to have her hanging about the place. There were bound to be complications. I was determined to get rid of her. What—I tried to imagine when it was too late—What the dickens had I called the little fiend into the tent for?

"So you want the *thakin* to give you twenty-five rupees?" I said in desperation at last.

She inclined her head over her fingers.

"Will you promise not to worry the *thakin* if I give you twenty-five rupees?" I asked, with a kind of feeling that I had done nothing but bargain with the woman since I had first seen her. I scanned her face as I spoke. There was a look in her black downcast eyes that told me, if once she could get hold of the good Matthew, she would not draw the line at twenty-five rupees. If she could! That was precisely it. But could she? I saw it all working under her glossy top-knot. It was not so

easy. There was the *thakin* to be reckoned with. She seemed to be considering it from every point. The image of Mrs. Cavisham's blazing face turned the scale, no doubt. She fidgeted irresolutely for a moment and then declared, like the wise woman she was, for the bird in the hand. "If your Honour will give me the twenty-five rupees, I will not trouble the *thakin*," she promised.

I gave her a look from under my eyebrows. "Then will you go off to Nyaungbin immediately?" I asked.

She let her smile tell me that she would do anything, absolutely anything, in reason. "Immediately San Baw comes, I will go," she assured me. "I will not let the *thakin* know I am here."

"You had better not!" I counselled her impressively.

She bent her head in submission to her finger tips, and a few seconds later drew a deep breath, looking up to me as much as to say that, the bargain having been struck, there remained nothing for me but to hand her the promised sum and let her go. I was not, however, going to look upon it as quite so simple a matter.

"Are you going to stop in the village all night?" I asked.

"I must wait for San Baw and the others," she reminded me.

"You start for Nyaungbin to-morrow?" I asked.

"To-morrow morning," she said.

"Very well, see here," I said. "If you have not spoken to the *thakin* by then, I will give you the money to-morrow morning."

This did not meet her wishes at all. She did not trust me altogether. I am not sure that she even liked thinking that I did not trust her.

"If your Honour will give the twenty-five rupees now," she said, "I will undertake not to see or speak to the *thakin*."

"How am I to know that you are going to keep your promise?" I enquired.

"Your Honour will see," she replied confidently.

"When I see, I will pay the twenty-five rupees," I said.

"Not before?" she asked with a wistful smile.

I was determined to be very firm. "No, certainly not before," I returned.

"But your Honour will see very soon, very soon indeed!" she urged, and patted the mat she sat on, as though the proof were to be vouchsafed there if only I took the trouble to wait.

This was, of course, absurd. "How can I see, woman, before you leave the place?" I demanded, and I, in my turn, patted the arm of my chair to show that I was not going to be argued with.

She met my demand with a query of her own. "How can your Honour give me the money to-morrow?" she asked, looking up from her hands for a quick, shrewd sidelong glance this way and that, which showed us that for the moment at any rate we were safe from observation. "We shall not have as good an opportunity as now."

There was solid truth in this, but I was not minded to go back on what I had said, even if it were to mean an infinity of scheming and arranging later. "I can give it to you to-morrow morning,"

I growled stubbornly. "You can come for it here."

She paid a good deal of dainty attention to her scarf ends. "The *thakin* may be in the rest house then and see," she objected, with her head on one side. Of course the hussy meant the *thakinma*, not the *thakin*, but it really did not affect her argument. I saw, on second thoughts, that she was right, that it would not do to choose a place that was at the foot of the rest house steps, practically under Mrs. Cavisham's nose. The verandah was not likely to be standing empty then as, mercifully, it was now. I rubbed my chin reflectively. "In whose house are you stopping?" I asked.

"In Maung Gale's," she said. "Your Honour will perhaps send the money there by the hand of a servant. We shall be leaving early to-morrow."

"No, I will give it myself," I returned sternly. If she imagined that I was going to let any of my crew know that I was being fool enough to give her back the rupees the Assistant Superintendent had squeezed from her, she was finely mistaken! It would be everybody's secret if I were weak-kneed enough for that.

She saw herself, in a moment, that her idea would not do. Might not a portion of the cash easily stick in the messenger's hand. Go-betweens were a mistake. She had her counsel ready. "There will be no one in the plantain grove to the north of the bungalow," she observed, and pointed. I knew the place; could see it almost from where I sat. There was no need for her to describe it to me.

"When the sun has risen two toddy trees height to-morrow morning," I said, as though that settled it, and, as she merely gave a submissive wag of her head, I presumed she had no better time to suggest.

She was ready if nothing better offered, but she did not altogether like it. She thought I might change my mind. "Your Honour will see long before then that the *thakin* will not know I am here," she told me, tapping the mat again, hoping against hope that I was going, after all, to find out that there was no time like the present, and put my hand in my pocket. I really believe that I should have done so if the movement had not reminded me so of poor old irresolute Cavisham diving at his chinking coins. I clasped my fingers out of danger behind my head. "*Taw byi!* Enough! Enough!" I cried. I was getting angry, and had got angrier still by the time she had crept away with a smile for our next merry meeting, as I realized that I had made an assignation with the creature round the corner, like an under-footman with the nursemaid. "Thank God, that will be the end of it, anyway!" I called out to myself, drumming my heels on the leg rests. "Never again! . . . How the devil had she managed to get round me?" For the next hour I was bursting with explosive comments like these, stupefied, now that it was over and the mischief done, that she should have succeeded in getting me actually a second time to make a sheer fat-headed ass of myself. The only comfort to me in my wrath

was the feeling that, as I had said, this would be the end of it.

I had ample space to belabour the chair and myself in morose solitude. The minutes dragged on. Dusk fell on the world. It was nearly dark when the Cavishams returned. I was dressing for dinner after a cold bath when I heard Mrs. Cavisham in the rest house verandah calling for a vermouth and soda with the voice of one crying in the wilderness for water. She had disappeared into the bedroom with her refreshment when I came out in my shirt sleeves from the tent door. I saw that the riders must have come in by the back way. Mr. Cavisham was still in the compound near the stables. He had been making the ponies his first care, and now I saw his long inconsequent form flitting through the twilight out by the carts, close, as it happened, to where, an hour or so before, I had first descried Ma Kin. I watched him pottering rather aimlessly among the shafts and wheels as though in search of something, and became aware of his half-hearted drift towards the gate of the compound. There was something in his gait that attracted my attention, and, just before he reached the fence, I had a revelation. He moved rapt across the coarse grass. He was in the toils! She was dragging him off? I knew he was taking his chance to slip away—as he thought, unobserved—and see the snake charmer in the village.

A hot wave surged over me. I was not going to let him sneak off to her. In a sudden perspiration I stepped out, without coat or waistcoat, into the

open, and he turned towards me. I thought for a moment that he had caught sight of my white shirt in the twilight. As he righted about, it came over me as a quaint coincidence that it was just there and so that Ma Kin had turned when I called her from my chair. I watched him. I had not spoken, and there was no need for me to speak. He came straight for me, and, just to see what would happen, I stepped back into the tent and let him pursue his fitful course.

Outside the tent he halted for a moment. It was not till afterwards that I remembered that Ma Kin had, when answering my call, for a brief space demurred to crossing the threshold. Then he pushed on, entered the tent, and, turning to the right, made, with something that was almost a swoop, for the mat the snake charmer had sat on. It was like watching a bloodhound in full pursuit. I waited breathless to see what would come next, but nothing came. He went no further. He had reached his goal—and was frankly disappointed with what he had found. He had somehow drawn blank. Twice he tugged moodily at his moustache, blinking out towards the village with his short-sighted eyes as though he would have turned his steps that way if something had not pulled him back. Then, all at once, he seemed to be aware, as through drifting clouds, that I was standing by him.

"Good heavens, how you startled me, Chepstowe!" he said. "I didn't see you in the dark."

Of course my white shirt had been staring him in the face ever since he had turned towards the tent,

but I had seen enough to realize that it was no use reminding him of the fact. "Do you want anything?" I asked.

"Thanks, no," he returned. "I only—I only——" It was all so fresh with him still that it did not seem to enter his head that any explanation of his presence was needed. A stranger on the spot, seeing us together, would have said that I was the interloper, emerging out of the gloom in the good man's dressing-room. "I was only——" he began a third time, more weakly, and, having got so far, he grasped the fact of my being half-dressed for dinner. "You don't mean to say it's nearly dinner time, Chepstowe," he cried. "I must get out of my riding things. Look here, shall I——"

It was just about then that he seemed fully to realize that, if he was to get out of his riding things, his first business was to get out of my tent. "Hanbury's not back yet, I see," he murmured, gazing round him, and I guessed that he had, now that he was "coming-to," formed a futile idea of pretending that it was to find Hanbury that he had looked in.

"They're very late, aren't they?" he went on. The remark carried him to the entrance. As he paused there, he gave a last side-glance in the direction of Ma Kin's mat, a reproachful glance. He seemed to bear it a grudge for having, so to speak, dried the scent up. I seemed, in a vague way, to be included in the resentment too. Then he took himself away.

I saw him up to the top of the steps. I knew he was safe the moment he was within psychic range of Mrs. Cavisham in the rest house. At the same

time I recognized that it had been a very near thing. I really hardly knew whether to wonder more at the strength of Ma Kin's magnetic hold over the gentle Matthew or at the rapidity with which she had fulfilled her undertaking to let go of him. "Your Honour will see very soon," she had said, and, upon my word, I had seen the thing done almost before an hour had elapsed, on the very mat that she had so confidently patted. It was most interesting, and I was almost sorry now that I had not had the grace to trust the woman and give her her twenty-five rupees in advance.

But then I remembered a look that she had just failed to hide, and there crept into my mind a queer doubt as to whether the manifestation over which I was blinking was not just a bit of spectacular display. It was all very well, but would she think it worth while to keep it up?

CHAPTER XXVI

IF I thought I was going to be able, after the fashion of that clockless country, to say when the sun had mounted two toddy palms height above the eastern sky line, I was mightily mistaken, for it fell out that the morning opened dank and misty and threatened to keep dull till long after the appointed hour of meeting. When I woke first and turned in my creaking bed, all was white beyond the compound fence. From the trees came a low persistent sound of dripping. The call of the village cocks reached us muffled. The kites were not abroad, and the sparrows in the thatch of the rest house roof twittered under cover. As I got up, I pictured San Baw plodding through the morning vapour under the dribbling forest branches, with his snake baskets, sheltered from the wet, slung over his shoulder ; and tried to reckon when he would be due in Mindaung to pick his wife up. I should have to keep my appointment with Ma Kin some little time before then. The plantain grove lay just off the cart track along which San Baw and the snakes would come. I fancied I could hit off the hour fairly well even without the sun's help. If I were late, so much the worse for her. She would just have to wait !

I looked sideways from under the tent flap. There was no sign of life in the rest house. Even the ayah was absent from her wonted corner of the verandah where she had a way of squatting, clasping her ankles. Behind me, with one lank pyjamaed leg protruding from under the blanket, Hanbury slept below his superfluous mosquito nets. Among other things I wondered, when they were married, what steps the new Mrs. Hanbury would take to curb Jimmy's snoring propensities.

The sky brightened a little as I drank my tea. The curtain of mist seemed to be lifting slightly, and, glancing at my watch, I learnt that it was half past seven. If the hidden sun were not by then the required height, it ought to be. In any case I decided to start for the trysting grove. If I were too early, so much the worse for her. I should come away. It would be her own fault if she were not in time, confound her!

"What time Master wanting bath?" enquired Daniel softly, so as not to disturb the sleeper. He was in an old Norfolk jacket of mine. In the unaccustomed cold he was a huddled-up, dishevelled object, barely warm-blooded enough to steam at the mouth; and seemed glad to clasp my teapot for its warmth. I gave him my orders, and he withdrew with the tea-tray. Hanbury slept on. I unlocked a bag, and, with cold fingers, which I had to blow on, took out five of the currency notes I had extracted from Ma Kin in the presence of the protesting Matthew. I should have preferred silver, but was out of it. This would have to serve.

A syce was coughing patiently as I passed the

stables. It was too thick for me to see whether it was one of my men or Hanbury's, but I settled to dose the whole crew with quinine impartially when I came back.

The big spiders' webs on the bamboo fence by the back entrance were outlined with dewdrops like tiaras of filigree and moonstone. At each tread my boot soles seemed to lift a damp film from the ground and show the dust dry underneath. I could just make out the outlines of a yellowish brown pariah dog preceding me, with tail erect, through the gate that led to the plantain grove, a full-fed, bumptious rascal. He might almost have been showing me the way through the morning vapour. I wished he could lead me straight to Ma Kin.

I hit the plantation by a kind of dead reckoning. It stretched hither and thither; it was much more straggling than I remembered, and, with the smothering thickness on all hands, it was almost impossible to find one's position, or judge where, white-jacketed among the clumps, the woman would be likely to be waiting.

The glimpse of brightness that had coaxed me out had passed on up the mountain side and the mist was settling down more distractingly than ever. The wisps of steamy cloud hovered and nestled and clung, and, when I was allowed to see anything, it was plantains and plantains and still again plantains, smooth leaved and leaden and shiny, each tuft outlined in its appointed place. If there was one track through the ranked stems there were half a dozen, branching all ways across

the whiteness, a veritable labyrinth. I had soon lost my bearings. My temper went with them.

A light puff of wind made a passage for itself through the grove, and at the white dim end of a vista of tossing grey leaves I saw, after a while, what looked like a black head, a dim, shifting blob. It might have been Ma Kin's top-knot. The wet feathery veil flounced down between us, grey waving arms flicked cold drops into my face; and, when I reached the spot, the apparition had gone, and there was no response to my suppressed call. Twice I seemed to see the black head looming in the distance, and twice I lost it at the end of a quick scuttle down a dim alley-way over damp clods. It was maddening! Within the hour, I knew, the sun would be blazing hotly down from a cloudless sky alive with wheeling kites, but till then all one could do was to peer and grope and stumble and cry out to attract attention—if one dared! Enveloped thus, I had lost my sense of direction and did not know how far towards the rest house I might have wandered. For all I knew, I might, if I raised my voice, find myself bawling blindly for the snake woman within earshot of every Cavisham on Mindaung.

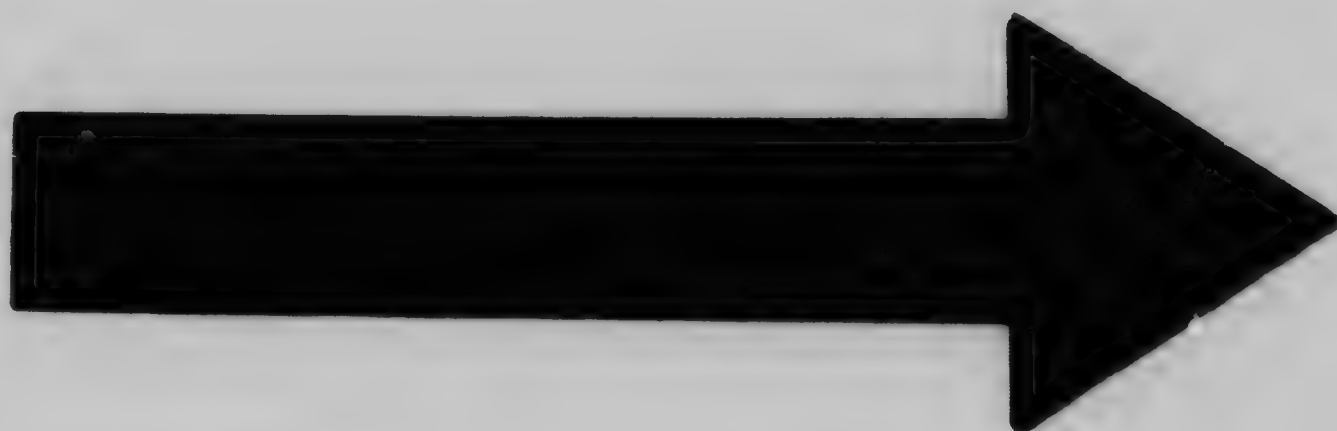
I had barely consigned the phantom head to perdition when its place was taken by footsteps, a steady muffled patter, and, if the dark visionary blob was elusive, the steps, believe me, were doubly so. I followed them down one path and up another, and, just when I should have been level with the ghostly tread, I heard it passing away provokingly behind my back in the opposite direction. And

so it was three times in succession. It was the clip! clip! of a woman's sandal, I could have wagered my life on it. This sound in its turn, however, melted into the weary flap of the plantain leaves and the chill moist patter from their broad ribbed faces. I had done my best. Ma Kin must just take her chance of getting her cash out of me when there was enough Christian sunlight to see by.

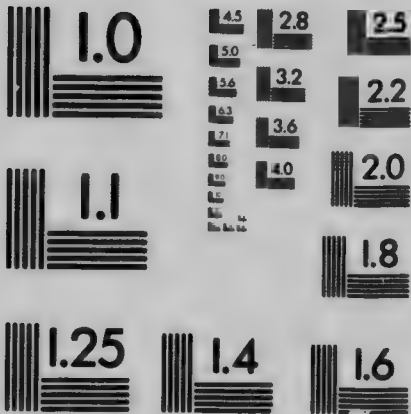
I had said this, perhaps, six times, and made about as many starts for my tent again. It is a living marvel to me now how long the snake woman was able to keep me lingering. And then, on a sudden, when all had been for a space sheer grey drift and empty silence, the spell seemed broken and I saw and heard together. There were footsteps again, a measured tread, unmistakably human; the mist ahead of me grew whiter, as though with the fire of a slender sun ray, and appeared to solidify into an upright form emerging to an appointed end; and, as I sighed relief and stepped forward, panting a little, with my bundle of notes, prepared to thrust them into brown hands and turn and go free—while I might—I discovered that I had made a mess of things and blundered into the line of the first morning walk that Mrs. Cavisham had ever taken at Mindaung.

I can hardly say what kind of ejaculation escaped me as I pulled up within a yard of her, but I know it was all that I was able to utter till she helped me out, encouragingly, resolved that the explanation of my presence should be a satisfactory one.

"So you're out after him too!" she cried.



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I think I managed to make my voice sound fairly natural. "After Mr. Cavisham?" I asked.

She seemed to have brought the sunshine with her. As she spoke there was a glimpse of blue above, fighting for foothold on the shifting white, and a warm sparkle on a green that shimmered. "To be sure," she said. "Didn't you see him?"

"No," I said. "I'm not after him. I'm only——" and I pulled myself up. There was no reason why I should tell her what I was doing out there.

After all, she had no great desire to know what I was doing. She only wanted me to see what her objective was. She gave an odd little laugh. "I thought you were looking after him as usual; taking care he didn't get into mischief," she said. "Didn't you see him go out?"

"Your husband!" I cried. "No. When was it?"

"Not five minutes ago," she replied. "Down the steps like a thief, but all dazed and silly, just as though he was walking in his sleep. He's not to be trusted. I made sure you had marked him down."

"Not I," I said. We stood thus and had quick, covert glances, each for the other, while the sunlight gathered strength and worked its will above us. If she were out in pursuit of Matthew, why, I asked myself, did she stand idle there before me? She, for her part, seemed to keep a sharp eye on the little sheaf of notes that I was trying to crumple tighter and tighter in my hand.

"Didn't you know she was in the village?" she asked presently.

"Who? Ma Kin?" I asked. "Yes, they told me yesterday, though I didn't know he knew. You think he has gone after her?"

"Of course! Where else?" she cried.

I rubbed my chin hard. And all the time I had fondly imagined that I was the only one of our party who knew of the snake woman's movements!

"She promised to keep away from him," I said.

"Promised! Promised whom?" she asked.

"Well, if you want to know, she promised me," I replied a trifle defiantly.

"You!" she cried. "So you've been seeing her again! Behind his back, I suppose."

"Behind his back, if you like," I returned, curbing myself. "Naturally I didn't want him to know. Why shouldn't she keep her promise? What makes you think she has got hold of him?"

She did not answer at first. She gazed out into the mist behind me, and threw me a quick glance. Then her glance ranged out through the plantains again, and back to my hand that was closed round the currency notes. A second time she gave her queer little laugh. "Well, she hasn't got hold of him *yet*," she said, and, as she said "*yet*," I followed her scornful eyes and understood.

I had shifted a little round, and till then had had my back to the rest house and village. Over my shoulder she could command and enjoy much that was hidden from me. Every moment the mist was clearing. Behind me the wreaths had swum this way and that; there was an open sunlit lane cut down through the waving leaves, and, as I turned and looked, at the further end of it, as in a

kind of halo, Ma Kin, in silk and tinsel, keeping her appointment, waiting—waiting by the same token for me! She had her back to us. Her face was directed towards the rest house. As chance would have it, she stood where several paths converged like the threads of a web, and the quick, flash-light picture I had of her was of some small gaudy spider, like those we have in Burma, waiting in the middle for its prey. And, as I looked, she turned her thin brown cheek and saw the *thakinma's* white one, and seemed to shrink and retreat before the fierce regard, and step into a cloud wreath and vanish. Then, as though at a given signal, the vapour descended upon us again for a space and blotted out everything except the nearest plantain stems, and faint across the drifts came the sound I had heard before and now knew to be the patter of the snake woman's sandals fading in the distance.

I made a movement. "I must go after her," I muttered below my breath.

Her eyes seemed to come closer together. "I'm sorry I disturbed you," she said. "I seem to have an unfortunate way of dropping in at awkward moments. It was an appointment, I suppose. You had arranged to meet her?"

I had taken a step away from her, but this fetched me round. "Yes it *was* an appointment," I cried. "But I made it to save your husband."

"Save him!" she exclaimed incredulously. "You said just now you were not out after him."

I looked her up and down. I came a step nearer her. "No more I was," I retorted. "But I was

going to keep her away from him all the same—
with this ! ” and I held up and shook my packet of
currency notes.

“ Away from him ! ” she echoed. Her voice
dropped, and seemed all of a sudden to grow husky.
“ Very noble of you I’m sure,” she sneered.
“ Might I enquire for whom you were keeping
her ? ”

CHAPTER XXVII

I THINK my eyes were blazing by this time. If they were, she must have known it, for she glared straight into mine, as I into hers. In a way I was furious, as furious as, in my weakness, I could be with this strange new woman, but with each fresh gust of wrath came a sensation that gripped my vitals with a difference. I was angry, but I had the glorious knowledge that she had been angry with me first; angry in an absurd, unjust, insolent way, and all on account of a pitiful little tawdry Burman. Even suppose she had grounds for her outrageous insinuation, what business was it of hers, that she should be in such a taking about it? What was I to her? What indeed? That was exactly where my savage delight came in, for now at last she had shown me quite unmistakably that I *was* something to her. The idea of my scheming to meet Ma Kin like this hurt her like a knife stab, goaded her to reviling. I could see it in her face, I could hear it in her voice, and, like a fool, I exulted. I longed to go on hurting her, and it seemed to me that I could best do this by speaking steadily and coolly, just to show how provokingly reasonable I could be through it all, how little I was going to let her preposterous insult wound me.

"Perhaps I had better explain," I said. "This is merely the twenty-five rupees your husband wanted to give Ma Kin. I was going to give it her myself, but only on the distinct understanding that she left him absolutely alone. She starts for Nyaungbin within an hour. I waited till the last moment to give her the money, because I didn't trust her. I thought she might try and get hold of him, but now I'm going to give it her and get rid of her before she can do any mischief. Now do you understand?"

She took it all in, frowning attentively. I think she believed me. For all that, when I turned to go, she broke out afresh crying "I won't let you give it her!"

She made no movement, and yet I had a feeling that she was barring the way. I took another step away from her. "If I don't give it her, she's bound to get hold of him," I cried.

She gave no sign of yielding. "What do I care," she retorted, "so long as she doesn't——"

"Doesn't what?" I cried impatiently. "It isn't a question of twenty-five rupees only. Don't you see? Once she has got hold of him, there's nothing she won't be able to do with him."

She looked away from me into the mist. "Of course she will," she agreed. "She'll do what she likes." Her passion had suddenly begun to ebb. She seemed to see visions in the moving vapours. She started again on a fresh note. "Isn't it uncanny?" she cried quickly and earnestly. "You think so too, don't you? I know you do! She has marked him down. He can't escape her

I don't know why, but it's there. I feel it. It's as you said it's like a snake and a bird. It's horrible! it's——" she gave a little shudder, and with it seemed to shake the horror from her. Her next words were "What can I do? I'm helpless, and, what's more, I don't mind! Do you know, I don't mind one little bit? I can't——"

There was no need for her to dwell on the gruesomeness of it all. I had forebodings enough of my own, and yet, strangely enough, with her standing there, giving me of her inmost, I was beginning to wonder whether I minded very much either. I trod a cloud of powder under my boot heel and looked up, to find her scanning my face attentively. She had let me have her full confession of impotence and was waiting to see how I would take it. Her arms had dropped to her side. She met my gaze resignedly, almost cheerfully. "I don't mind a little bit," she admitted, drawing a deep breath. "I don't seem to care to know what she does to him, but——" (for a moment her eyes came closer together again) "but she's not going to do the same to you! I *can* prevent that!"

She let this fervid intimation sink in. There was silence. She kept her eyes on me. A side-glance showed me her, motionless, there, in the welter of mist and sunlight that encompassed us. It may have been that she was trying to pit her strength against the snake woman's. It may have been that she was giving me time to see how she was unluring her soul. However it was, she stood there with nervous drooping hands, between me and the village. Up till then I had been on the

point of rushing after Ma. Kin with my handful of currency notes, resolved that nothing on earth should hinder me. Now came the opposing tug, gentle but relentless, and I was to be reminded of Matthew the ineffectual, hovering, loose-lipped, over the mat in my tent, restrained, for the moment, from scorching his silly old wings in the flame. Like him, I was being held back, though possibly only (when I came to think of it) for a scorching of another kind! Still, I was kept back, and it was with a sense of momentary escape that in the end I turned my face away from where the haunting patter of the sandals had faded into the distance, and looked full at my companion.

It was to find her radiant in a fresh stream of sunlight that had burst through the white morning wreaths. The brief interval had done its work for her as well as for me. She was changed, transformed, almost transfigured in the victorious beams. She was no longer critical, suspicious; she seemed to glow with the sudden rosy beauty of a new benig-nance. She had found her *rôle*. Her smile was a thing inspired, a token of fellowship in solicitude.

"If you are going to look after him," she laughed "I'm going to look after you and keep you out of mischief! You may not like it, but I'm going to!"

Her hands had quickly grown active again. It struck me how wonderfully clean and white she was by comparison with the little garish pink and yellow doll who had scanned us through the alley-way of plantains. She had all the firm mild benevolence of a guardian angel. I felt in her presence like a silly

headstrong boy, who must be kept at all costs—yes, at all costs!—from his own undoing. "You're frightened of me again, I know," she cried. "But you needn't be. I'm not going to hurt you! I'm not going to hurt you! It will be all right." She coaxed me like a child. Her bitterness seemed to have dropped from her like a soiled cloak. She was all soft reasonableness. "Why can't you trust me?" she asked, and she kept her tender, half-amused smile upon me till I could have sworn that I was a mean scoundrel not to trust her.

She had me in the hollow of her hand. The desire to hurt her had passed, but some instinct made me struggle feebly, for the image of that little gaudy venomous spider with her fangs in poor old buzzing Matthew would keep lingering in my mind. "Why are you helpless? Why can't you look after him too?" I objected, like a sullen schoolboy. "She'll be up to mischief. She'll do him some harm. You've got to think of him."

She had an air of gentle reproof for my importunity. "Don't bother about him," she said with sober softness. "Leave him alone and let him have a good time. After all, why shouldn't he have one?" she argued. "God knows, I've given the poor dear a bad enough time so far! I owe him a good one." She lingered a moment over her self-reproach, but soon began again. "Surely he can be trusted to look after himself? Don't think of him, or of her. Let them be. You don't grudge her to him, do you? You oughtn't to, if I don't grudge him to her."

I can see now how low I must have fallen that

this last should have stirred me neither to red wrath nor to mirth unspeakable. "Grudge her to him!" I growled, trying in a befogged way, and failing, to fan up a flame of real anger.

"Don't be cross," she pleaded. She was determined to make every allowance for my petulance. "Leave her alone, leave her alone!" she went on. "Why do you want to go to her? You can do a great deal better than that. I can give you more than she ever can, and the right way too, the right way. Leave him to her!" she exclaimed, dismissing the pair of them to their bliss. "If he's having a good time, why shouldn't we, you and I? A glorious time! He won't mind. He daren't mind now." For a moment she almost made me see how poor Matthew's infirmity was to justify everything between us. "You simply can't think what a good time we might be having," she went on, and then something in my face made her cry "Oh, the right sort of good time. Don't be frightened. I'm not that sort!" She soothed me with all the sane sobriety of a guardian angel.

Somehow she had got me away from the spot, out of that hideous maze of a plantain grove, out into the open. I recollect murmuring at intervals at her side "We've got to think of him. We've got to think of him," and to show how much I was thinking of him, I began walking steadily away from the hapless Matthew, leaving him for the little spider to wreak her will on. I forget all the urgent words she plied me with as we followed a winding foot track through the scrub; what I do remember, and vividly, is the way the white mist melted

and went off in a quivering haze, and left us on the bare slopes under a hot sun, with the flat plain stretching below us and the long-backed green hill towering gigantically above us into the blue. And ever and anon the pitiful picture of old Matthew, fluttering and flapping, rose before me. I did call out once, in a moment of acute self-reproach. "Look here, we really *must* go and do something for him!" and, though the heat was beginning to tell on her and make her pant and tremble, she was still able to be patient with me, to show me the futility of it all.

"What is the good?" she cried. "She has got him body and soul! Just as she would have got you, remember, if I hadn't rescued you. We can do nothing for him. I've felt it all along. Especially yesterday. Do you know, he nearly slipped away to her after our ride last night. I could see it in his eyes when he came in, poor old dear! And the curious thing is that, so long as he gets what he wants, I don't mind. The only thing I do mind is——" she broke off and looked at me with a smile that was pitifully wry. There was a blank left for me to fill, but I could furnish nothing out of the turmoil of my own communings to fill it with, and she went on.

"Yes, if I hadn't saved you from her, you would have been the same!" she cried, with a return of her first passion. "There you go, arranging to meet her in the jungle when nobody was about! Would you have done that for me—got up early and crept out to meet me, all in the mist, before anyone was up? Would you? I could have made it worth

your while ; more worth it than that little yellow monkey ever could for you—or for Matthew. What's she doing with him ? Let's give them a lesson. Can't we pay them out, you and I ? ”

What form did she intend our reprisal to take ?

“ Why ever should we pay them out ? ” I cried.

“ Poor old chap, he can't help it ! ” There must have been some throb of sympathy in my voice, though, if the truth be told, never had Mr. Cavisham seemed less worth fighting for.

She was quick to see that she had struck a wrong note. “ Yes, poor old chap ! ” she cried. “ You're quite right. What a poor old chap it is ! Why ever did he saddle himself with me ? . . . Was there ever such a hideous mistake . . . He and I . . . ”

I could see her taking stock of the past, with its black errors, its lapsed opportunities. She wanted me, with her hot face turned away, to see all the blankness through her eyes, to understand, to condone. Moving restlessly over the steaming hillside, gazir, straight ahead, careless, for once, of appearances, her white sun hat, with its blue veil, thrown a little back from her wet forehead, she let me have it all in passionate snatches, asking for no comment or reply, anxious only that I should listen and understand.

“ Wrapped up, he is, wrapped up in his work. No, I don't bear him a grudge . . . don't think that of me . . . but, honestly now, wouldn't it be kindest to put an end to it all ? Kindest to both of us . . . He would soon get over it. He has drifted away already, oh, ever so far ! . . . and as for me . . . if you only knew the emptiness of it all !

Wrapped up! Wrapped up! Kind, yes he couldn't help being kind, but one wants more than kindness! Never a thought for anyone or anything outside his tribes, his measurements—till now. Yes, *now* he has got something else. He's happy, and I'm glad he's happy. Don't think I'm not glad. He's happy, but where do I come in? Isn't it rather sickening when I think what might have been?" She turned for a reproachful moment on me. "There's Jimmy Hanbury," she said. "He was a dear boy, Jimmy. You never appreciated him, you know. I could have twisted him round my finger—made him do anything I wanted to; whether you liked it or not, mind you! I wouldn't, though. I played the game, didn't I?"

She was not waiting for an answer, but I gave her one nevertheless. "You did play the game," I admitted, but, in a tone that seemed to show her the hopelessness of her plight.

"And what reward did I get?" she demanded, bitterly. "What made you choke me off him like that if you were only going to be horrid to me? . . . I don't understand you. . . ." Her voice rose to a pitch of resentment. "Up in arms every time he looked at me . . . A face like thunder . . . Of course I thought. . . Say I played the game, because I did . . . And got nothing for it . . . Nothing . . . Jimmy's gone to Meg, and Matthew to that little yellow reptile, and you . . . just when I want you most . . . It isn't . . . It isn't fair, you know!"

Moving there beside me, half choked by her accusing passion, white and tired in the trembling

glare, she had gradually, imperceptibly, lost all her charm. She was no longer the white-robed one who, half unseen, had plucked alluringly at my heart-strings in the twittering gloom of warm nights. She was hot and tearful. No movement of hers escaped me. Her twitching mouth was almost a grimace. I hated the way her damp hair had begun to straggle down over her neck. Instead of the guardian she was the recording angel. And yet, oddly enough, her grip on me was in a way firmer than ever. At her wild words I cowered in a frenzy of self-examination. Had I wronged her? Had I led her on? Had I, by word or deed, hinted at the marvels she had for a while hedged me round with? As the question sprang to my lips, it rushed in upon me that I must have shown my hand. I had been mean. I had encouraged her. I had failed to hide my secret. And now I was to be accused of deserting her, playing her false, just when her glamour was gone and her need for me was greatest. And so it came about that a jeering fate decreed that, just when I least felt the fierce desire to surrender, the sense that it was my duty to yield became strongest. It seemed at that blind mortifying moment as the only thing I could do; an act of reparation, a sacred charge. At a given moment we both stopped, warned by the sound of distant voices that our wanderings must have brought us round into the neighbourhood of the rest house again. Half desperate, I chose this opportunity to try and state my despicable case.

"Look here, Mrs. Cavisham," I blurted out. "I'm awfully sorry . . . I had no idea . . . but,

if, by anything I've said or done, I've led you to think . . . "

She had her handkerchief rolled into a ball and was pressing her damp white cheeks with it. She did nothing to help me out. She let me stammer and gape. . . "I'm really awfully sorry," I repeated feebly.

Her heavy eyes looked me slowly up and down. "Of course you're sorry," she said, at last. "That's exactly the point. Just sorry. Not glad; not proud of having, even for a moment . . . Some people would have gloried in it."

Her tone cut me to the quick, but I stuttered on, with my vision of atonement before my eyes. "Curse it!" I cried. "Sorry or glad or proud, I want you to understand all the same, whatever may have happened, that if there is anything. . ."

God knows, I must have cut a poor enough figure! She had a glance for my helplessness which seemed to run hovering along the borderland between scorn and ineffable pity.

"No there's nothing," she said wearily, "absolutely nothing," she spoke as though it were too late.

I was so sure she did not mean it and did not expect me to think it, that I began to babble some craven rubbish about "When you're less tired, Mrs. Cavisham."

At this flabby effort to put off the moment of decision she actually almost smiled. What happened immediately after this is now more or less vague, all I remember is that, for a moment, she lifted her eyes with a gesture of deadly fatigue and cried:

"Oh! don't talk about it! For goodness sake, don't make a *favour* of it!"

I began nevertheless to try and persuade myself that the matter had been merely deferred to a less harassed hour.

Looking back on the silence that followed, I have a feeling that, given a little further time, I might perhaps have extricated myself a little less shamefully. However that may be, it was with a feeling of the profoundest relief that I welcomed the interruption that suddenly came in the shape of a quick frightened babble of voices from beyond the tamarinds, recalling the agitated discord that had arisen the morning Nagagyi escaped. It gave us something fresh to face, and, provided it obliterated the past quickly, I felt it could hardly be too exciting.

"There's another of those beastly snakes loose!" I cried, wondering, as the hubbub grew, whether it might not be something worse, and not caring greatly if it was. The hum of consternation was all clustered at a single point, but, as we listened, it seemed to spread and radiate, like the voice of a scattering hive swarm, or rather the ripples that spread out from a plop in a duck pond. And standing there in the winding track we were soon reached by the first of the scattering eddies. Round the corner came Daniel at a quick ungainly shuffle, with a face green with dismay; sent out, I could tell, to look for us.

"What's the matter?" I cried.

The creature's hands left his labouring chest and began to wave convulsively. "That Burma woman done got bitten!" he gasped with eyes bulging whitely. "Mr. Cash'm done got bitten by one snake too! Just there, ma'am! Just there!" and in his

excitement he sidled up to Mrs. Cavisham with his hand out, pointing to the base of his own coffee-coloured thumb.

"Is he in the rest house?" I demanded, and with eyes and teeth he signified a dumb assent.

"How did it happen?" I cried.

He had nothing more to tell us. "Master calling for Missis!" he croaked hoarsely, still gesticulating at my companion. "Missis please to come quick!"

I gripped him by his shaking shoulder and turned him round. "Tell Master that Missis is coming as quick as she can! Run!" I commanded, and he was off, almost before the words had left me, shambling, with loose elbows and flapping loin-cloth, back to the scene of the trouble.

I swung round and faced her. She could go no whiter than she already was. After her first gasp she might have been turned to stone. "Come along!" I shouted, and caught her by the arm.

At my touch she seemed to throb and stir, and strive to form a plan of action. Her hand sought her mouth, her eyes my face. Her voice seemed to come from unseen depths. "Must I?" she whispered. "I'm frightened. What were they doing together? How were we to know? What was she——"

To this day I believe that if I had said "Don't go! Stop here with me," she would have stopped. Perhaps in a way she was testing me! If so, I can only say that I was again found wanting. "Good God, of course you must come! Why didn't we go to him before?" I exclaimed, and, still holding her arm I moved quickly along the path. She followed me with a little hopeless groan that may have meant that now at last she had given up all hope of making me see her point of view.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE rest house compound was almost deserted as we hurried across it through the back entrance. Only the cook's matey, left in charge while his superior supped of the tragedy, laboured in his loin-cloth over the breakfast that, whatever happened, somebody would in due course be sure to want and shout for. There was a syce or two lingering on the steps in front, but the bulk of the brown establishment, I guessed, had been sent off to scour the jungle for Mrs. Cavisham and me. In the verandah the ayah was whispering hoarsely to the waterman, who held an enamelled jug and uncovered red teeth sympathetically. From one of the inner rooms came the sound of a voice, measured and dispassionate, almost cheerful. I hardly recognized it as Mr. Cavisham's.

"Couldn't you ease it just a little?"

"You've got to bear it as tight as possible, you know," answered Hanbury.

The sufferer peered at us from over Hanbury's bowed shoulders with a queer shamefaced expression as we swept in. "Isabel," he said. "They've told you, I suppose. Isn't it unfortunate?"

He had his coat off and his shirt sleeve tucked up. A handkerchief had been wound round his upper arm, and with a fork, snatched, apparently, from

the breakfast table in the verandah, Hanbury was twisting this ligature tight. Miss Cavisham stood over them with a bottle of ammonia. My recollection of the scene is that Daniel was holding a reddened basin under the outstretched hand. The punkah was flapping feverishly overhead.

Isabel said nothing but "Most unfortunate! How could you?" and glancing round, saw the ammonia bottle in Miss Cavisham's hand, took it from her and sniffed eagerly at it with eyes shut.

Hanbury's worried face turned round from Mr. Cavisham's elbow. "We seem to have nothing but ammonia," he observed, dolorously. "The snake people tried to make us sample some stuff of theirs, but we thought we wouldn't. It's there, though. Do you advise our sticking it on? What do you say, Chepstowe?"

"I think I can go one better than that," I said. "I've got my permanganate."

Hanbury cried out, "Oh! good *man*!"

I was out of the rest house into the tent with his voice still ringing in my ears. I had a qualm half-way there lest, after all, I should have been wrong, but my little wooden tube was mercifully in my bag, with its lancet at one end and its purple crystals at the other. Government serves them out broadcast now, but at that benighted epoch they were destined only for the selected few. I was back with the others almost before I could congratulate myself.

"We've sliced it about enough already, I expect," murmured Hanbury, with his mouth twisted on one side, as Mr. Cavisham extended his dribbling hand.

Looking at the mangled member, I quite agreed

with him. I rubbed the permanganate of potash in where the gashes opened deepest, and, glancing round when all was over, was glad Daniel had had the sense to bring the whisky. We took some all round, a two finger peg for Mr. Cavi-sham first, as he was the invalid ; and that and the ammonia fumes carried the ladies through finely.

" You had better lie down now," said Mrs. Cavi-sham drily. He obeyed like a child, and Hanbury and I moved out into the verandah

I tiptoed to the head of the steps and halted. " However did it happen, Hanbury ? " I asked him in a whisper, perching upon the verandah rail. " Were you here ? "

He followed softly and placed himself in front of me. " Lucky I was ! " he muttered back. " Rather ! By the tent." The lower his voice sank, the bigger his eyes seemed to grow. " What the deuce they'd been doing I don't know," he ejaculated under his breath, " but while I was standing putting my topi on, about where that syce is, out they came, the pair of them, promenading out of the jungle, from the back there to the front here, together."

" He and Ma Kin ? " I asked.

" He and Ma Kin ; out of the jungle. He after her, like walking in his sleep. Swinging his glasses from side to side, the old boy. I hadn't seen him leave the rest house and I hadn't noticed her before, though, now that I come to think of it, I did have a sight of the snake chap—what's the swine's name ? San Baw, waiting, with two of the baskets out there by the village gate. Anyway, along they came up to the compound fence. You should have seen the

woman's face! She gave tongue immediately she spotted San Baw—'Amelo!' and all that, in a frightful state. The beggar was on to her like a knife with something to put on the bite; quick as a flea, I will say that for him, but, no, she wanted something else, something he hadn't got handy, and kept squealing for it till he and the others got her away into the village."

"And Cavisham?" I asked.

He jerked his arm impatiently and thrust his handkerchief up his sleeve. "You may well ask!" he ejaculated, darkly. "After they had cleared well off, round he turned on me, and took his hand from behind his back and pointed. 'Exactly where I was bitten, too,' he said, quite calmly. I tell you, Chepstowe, he seemed to look upon it as rather a funny little joke. Not a word before. He might have been asleep all the time. When I think of the minutes he must have wasted! 'Good God, why didn't you let me know before?' I said, and all he said was 'It wasn't till after she was bitten,' as though that made any real difference! and he put on his glasses, and blinked at his hand, and there—well, you saw where—there were the marks of the fangs quite clear. I had my razor out in a jiffy, I can tell you, but, Lord. I was never meant to be a medical student, and Meg—Miss Cavisham—made me jolly well stop. It was she who thought of ammonia. He thought of the tourniquet dodge himself. And then you turned up. Look here, Chepstowe, I ought to have cut deeper, but I hadn't the stomach, literally." He picked up the last of his whisky and water from the verandah rail.

I swung my leg for a while in silence. "Whatever were they doing in the jungle together?" I asked at last. "Didn't he say anything? With a snake too!"

"No, he said nothing," returned my companion, imparting a circular motion to his tumbler before draining the dregs. "Nothing except, 'A remarkable experiment.' That's what he called it! A remarkable—I should just about think it was remarkable, though what he was experimenting on, God only knows. I don't think he does himself."

"What the deuce did the silly old——" I began, and, catching his eye through the bottom of the tumbler, I suddenly was urged to remember that we were talking of a gentleman who, if he did live, would live to be Hanbury's father-in-law.

My companion put his glass down and felt for his handkerchief again. "And I don't suppose," he said, with a gloomy nod, "that we shall ever know now."

We looked at each other. He raised his eyebrows and pursed his mouth.

"You think we came in too late with the perman-ganate?" I said.

He kept his lips screwed up, he wagged his head despondently. "I gathered from what he said," he murmured, "that he had only just been bitten, but you know how quick you've got to jump in if you want to do any good. Every second's precious. And, as I say, I don't think he really knew very much of what happened before he came into the compound with that little rip. She had him fairly in tow, kind of hypnotised, it looked like."

He shook his head again, musing. "Yes, now, whatever were the pair of them doing with a snake, of all things, out in the jungle, at this hour of the morning? A remarkable experiment! I should just about——" he pulled himself up short, for Miss Cavisham appeared at the door of the inner room.

She came slowly forward towards us. "He wants you," she said to my companion. "He wants to talk to you about Tom."

Hanbury nodded solemnly. He appeared to know who Tom was. "How is your father, Miss Cavisham?" I asked softly.

She glanced back over her shoulder. "Very uncomfortable and giddy," she whispered, and then her head went close up to Hanbury's. "You see, he feels he wants to settle up things—in case—in case——"

"It's as bad as that, is it?" he whispered, but she made no reply, merely caught him by the hand. He passed an arm round her and helped her into the inner room. I suddenly felt a stranger and forlorn. With my permanganate in my pocket, I set off to see how Ma Kin was faring.

I had no difficulty in finding where she was. The open space in front of the headman's house was packed with brown, half-clad villagers, and it was easier to locate than to get within arm's length of the central figure of the crowd. They had laid her down on a mat in the shade, where the top-knots clustered thickest; her white sleeve had been stripped back, and there was what looked like a green poultice of chopped leaves on her wound. A lean, officious dame in a faded crimson cloth was holding

chips of betel nut under her nose. Through her tribulation could be heard the voice of the pock-marked brother—for once sure of holding an audience—comparing her symptoms (and they were distressing enough), with those of Ma Nyut, the lamented sister. He was frankly pessimistic, and the resigned gossips had plenty to shake their heads over. My offer of permanganate was refused; indeed, I could see by the woman's tortured face that I had come too late to do any good. The brother, calculating Ma Kin's lasting powers in terms of the cook house, had given her about two "rice pot boilings" to live, and the protesting patient seemed to think the estimate a fair one. Saya Tu, the wrinkled, hovered, with his green and orange head-cloth awry, on the outskirts of the group, a red bag of medicaments dangling from his shoulder, and talked learnedly of the sovereign properties of rhinoceros blood, but I gathered that his remedies, like mine, had been spurned. After all, when it was obvious that Ma Kin's time had come, it was more to the point to talk of funerals than of antidotes. Rather did it lie with San Baw to consider, if the obsequies were to be a success, how best he could, before it was too late, extract a further cash payment from the *thakin*, who, it would seem had, in some extraordinary way, managed to lose another snake in the jungle.

The snake woman's tortured yellow face haunted me back to the rest house. It was something to find Mr. Cavisham still well enough to transact business when I got back. I glanced into the inner room upon a family conclave. Hanbury and Miss Cavisham sat on each side of the patient's bed.

Mrs. Cavisham stood near the window, still sniffing her ammonia. Mr. Cavisham was in obvious distress, breathing with difficulty and stroking his swollen limb. He signed to me, however, not to go away. "The more witnesses the better," he murmured, with a drawn smile. Hanbury, pencil in hand, was noting down on the back of an envelope the address of the solicitor who kept Mr. Cavisham's will. This done, they got on to "Tom" again. Tom, I soon learned, was Meg Cavisham's brother, just eighteen, with a weak chest, meditating the Home Civil Service. The family seemed to run mainly to maiden aunts, and his father had taken upon him to commend the lad specially to the care of his brother-in-law elect. "He wants a man's advice," he murmured with laboured utterance. "And you're seven years older than he is, Hanbury. You'll be kind to my boy, won't you, if anything happens?" His eyes travelled round, and he appeared to include me in his exhortation.

"He's like me, you know," he went on, apologetically. "Needs a lot of looking after. Heaven grant he may never——" he did not finish his pious ejaculation. "Foolish things!" he muttered, brokenly. "Easily led away!" He seemed to be garnering his own experiences and to be able to look almost with detachment on his last act of weakness. He cast a rueful glance at his wife. He would have liked to ask for her forgiveness. "I wish you'd go and lie down, Isabel," he said, a moment later. "You are looking fit to drop!" and then he put his hand to his neck. "It was just like a bang on the head just then!" he com-

plained. "I can't feel in this arm now. You'll make allowances for Tom, won't you, Isabel?" Mrs. Cavisham did not move, but she was not looking at her husband. She kept her gaze on the swinging punkah. Tom left her cold.

Out on the verandah, later, Hanbury and I snatched a hurried meal and despatched an urgent message for the civil surgeon. A swift rider would be down at the telegraph office at Padu by evening, and we might almost expect our man post haste across country by the evening following. The chances of his being able to do anything remedial seemed gone, still one was doing the best one could, and, if the worst came to the worst, we were sure then of something authoritative that might save painful inquisitions later. It was while we were speeding the mounted constable on his way, not without hoarse threats of trouble if he ventured to draw rein before sunset, that the pock-marked brother shuffled through the gate. He regretted to have to tell us, but, in case we had not heard, that deplorable beast, Nagagyi, had positively escaped again! He gave no particulars, in fact he had come to elicit, not to impart facts. Ma Kin was evidently past telling anything of what had happened in the jungle, and all depended upon whether the *thakin* (who would not, the pitted thing thought, deny having been present at the escape) was disposed to be communicative. The youth fairly fished for news, but he fished in vain. Frankly, he had arrived at a bad time. Hanbury dealt faithfully, though huskily, with him, with duly lowered voice and an

ear over his shoulder, so to speak, for the invalid, and our visitor fled precipitately, without, by the way, having told us whether Ma Kin was still alive.

It was soon after Hanbury had gone in again to the sufferer that Mrs. Cavisham pushed the purdah aside and came out. I was finishing my breakfast, and she joined me. Daniel, in his fullness of heart, had sought to solace our stricken hearts with the first mango fool of the season. It was the only thing she fancied; that, with some *crème de menthe* afterwards to correct its surprises. She had a way of putting her elbows on the table at meal time that awoke in me freakish memories of Parisian restaurants. A grim fancy of mine pictured her enjoying her new-born freedom at a small table, with her mitigated mourning and long gloves reflected in half a dozen plate-glass mirrors. I imagined her black-coated *vis-à-vis*, and once I tried to think of myself as facing her; but, somehow, as a sprightly relict, to be wooed in a heavy reputable fashion, she failed to carry her old allurements. She was unconvincing, she bordered dangerously on the commonplace, the merely objectionable. My mind absolutely declined to fit my stolid figure into her gilded frame.

I rather think that, without in the least realizing how near her weeds she actually was, she had some similar image in her mind's eye, as she sat and fidgeted with her spoon. The compound had quieted down. Only now and then came the cry of a lizard chirruping on the hot walling, or a drowsy reiterated flute-

like bird note from the tamarind trees outside. On the further side of the partition the punkah wheel squeaked like a wheezy breather wrapped in a stertorous siesta. Behind its measure ran a background of subdued sound. Mr. Cavisham's voice came to us rather shakily, with now and then a plaint of pain or giddiness. The commending of Tom seemed to bulk large in the poor man's mind. He was still at it, seemingly. Tom and Meg were his main earthly concern now, and the spirit of the first Mrs. Cavisham brooded over the inner room. I began to understand why Mrs. Cavisham the second preferred sitting over her mango fool to cherishing a sinking husband.

She made an attempt to catch my eye. With food and stimulants her colour had flowed back a little. She had recovered some of her magnetic assurance. Hanbury had been encouraging her and she seemed satisfied that matters were not desperate yet. What was more, our flustered jungle encounter seemed to have drifted into a past that was closed and done with. We might have been opening a new life chapter by mutual consent.

"We're rather out in the cold, aren't we?" she murmured, with raised eyebrows and a ghost of a smile.

"Out in the cold!" The phrase, it flashed across me, might very well have been meant to bring a certain hushed palpitating moment back to my memory.

"Out in the cold together," she repeated.

This time it was she and not I, who said "together." She was quite willing, if I were too, to

allow a community of neglect to be a bond between us. I said nothing, and she whispered on, with an ear vigilantly attuned to the voice from the inner room that filtered through the trelliswork top of the partition:

"Just like his father: short-sighted, narrow-chested. He'll never be good for anything."

"Who? Tom?" I asked.

"Of course, Tom," she returned, using her spoon to tap her liqueur glass with. "A spotty, sickly boy. With a will of his own, though. If Matthew thinks that Jimmy will be able to do anything with him, he's mistaken. Meg, too. What a handful! He's made up his mind, though, that somebody's got to be put in charge of them—to 'run' them. Jimmy's marked down for the job. It'll be my turn next."

I did not look up from my plate. "Who's he going to put in your charge?" I asked.

"Heaven forbid!" she gave a little mock shudder. "Oh no, not in my charge. It's me! He'll want to consign me to somebody, dear angel; he thinks he's so bad. I shouldn't wonder a bit if——" she stopped and scanned the bowl of her spoon with a curling lip. "I shouldn't wonder a bit if he asked you to," she observed softly.

I looked up at her sideways to see how I was to take it. "Asked me to look after you?" I enquired.

"He's capable of anything," she murmured into her liqueur glass, and, with my brain half stunned with the surprises of the last few hours but prepared for fresh marvels, it struck me that the good Matthew might really be almost capable even of that! She sat and tinkled on her glass

with restless hands, and at last put an end to the silence that was all of my making. "Would you?" she asked.

"Would I look after you?" I enquired. "Why, that's exactly what you say I've been doing all along!"

She kept her eyes lowered. "Yes—in one way," she replied. "But, you see, it will be different then—so dull, won't it be? So horribly respectable. You'll hate it."

"Yes, it will be different," I admitted gruffly.

"And you'll hate it?" she pressed me.

"I don't know that I shall like it, if it's the way I mean," I returned with my eyes on her.

"But you did like it before," she urged.

"When—when it wasn't respectable?" I enquired grimly.

She threw her spoon down with a petulant jerk. "If you like to put it that way!" she muttered. "But you *did* like it when it—when it wasn't."

"It doesn't follow that I should like it when it was," I was quick to retort.

"I thought not," she said scornfully. "You'll hate it. How like a man!"

Her tone roused me. The events of the past hour had left me intolerably middle-aged, insufferably unromantic. I had had no *crème de menthe*, you see, and it stirred my bile to see her, in this her husband's hour of agony, face her widowhood so flippantly. I turned upon her with the feeling that if I did not speak my mind out then and there, I should never have the strength to do so.

"Good cause for me to hate it, if it ever were like this—as it very well might be," I growled.

"Like this?" she echoed.

"Yes, like this," I went on. "Suppose, now, that something happened to me while I was 'looking after' you, as you call it. Suppose——"

My phrasing of it seemed to throw a sudden fresh light on her airy imaginings. She fingered the table cloth. "Oh, if you mean it *that way*——" she whispered.

"Why ever shouldn't I mean it that way?" I demanded warmly, all of what she called the Puritan in me rising in revolt. "If I meant anything, it would be the real thing. Suppose I was ill, now; in a bad way . . . dying!"

"Oh, but don't talk as though *he* was——" she began, but I was not going to be interrupted.

"Wouldn't it be a case of *this* over again?" I asked, and nodded in the direction of the room where Mr. Cavisham's accents still rose from time to time over the lament of the punkah wheel.

She did not understand at first, but presently I saw the knowledge dawn in her flaming face. "You mean I shouldn't be by your side!" she brought out, softly but fiercely.

"Exactly," I returned, knowing that my only hope lay in my being able to put it to her as coarsely, as brutally as I could. "You'd be outside in the verandah with the other beggar," I growled.

At this her passion blazed. "My God!" she whispered fiercely. "That's not true. You know that's not true!"

I sat still under her accusing gaze. I felt I

deserved anything after what I had uttered. "Not true! Prove it then," I muttered defiantly, not knowing what else to say.

"How?" she asked, and "How, indeed?" was all I could ask myself. However, I pointed, without a word, to the door of the inner room. Her glance followed my finger, and she understood. There was that, at any rate. It was not much, but it was something.

She rose to her feet. She rested her white knuckles on the table cloth opposite me. "He doesn't really want me," she said. "If I had been his first wife . . . but you'll never understand, never! You don't seem to think I've anything to forgive. He's shamed us all. What did he do it for?" Then she drew herself together and turned towards the sufferer's room. "Don't think I've got no heart," she murmured. "If I had *ever* been anything to him, it would have been different; but—well . . . this is just to show you you're wrong."

I said nothing. I let her see that I thought it was the very least she could do; and so, just to show me I was wrong about "the other beggar," she went in to sit with her husband.

Stepping to the edge of the verandah a few minutes later, I was confronted, in the glare of the open, by a Burman constable, sprung, as it were, from the earth, who saluted stiffly, with paper in fist. I thought at first that he was the man who had been told off to take the note to the civil surgeon, and was on the point of reviling him for not having started yet. Then, looking again, I saw that this flat-

nosed brown and buff apparition was sweating from a recent ride and that what shone white in his hand was not the urgent message to the doctor, but the English mail, fresh brought on pony-back from Padu. The Cavishams had the lion's share of the correspondence, but there was a letter in the bundle for me—from Maria. It was quite time I had it, for it had lain a matter of four days at Padu; still, belated as it was, I had not expected to be honoured again so soon. It was, with its spider-legged script, a thing of surprises. Claude, Maria's Claude, whom she had summoned so imperiously to England, had apparently failed to get his leave. Some wretch or other, my sister wrote disgustedly, had gone sick, and it seemed uncertain now when the wedding would come off. She hardly knew what to do; whether to wait at home till the wretch recovered and Claude could fly to her, or to come out herself to India before the hot weather began. She could only hope for the best, though it looked now horribly like having to put everything off till November. She was waiting now for developments in a direction unstated.

Having spread her cry of distress over three pages, Maria straddled on to other topics, and I learnt that Miss Meredith's engagement to Mr. Thomas Archer was as good as off. "*I should think I ought to know,*" Maria's lanky caligraphy assured me, as though her data had been consistently challenged. "*She hated it really from the very first. He frightened her into it with that awful scowl of his. He simply wouldn't take 'no.'* As I said to Claude, if he had tried to bully me in the same way, I should

never have looked at him (Claude, I mean). I do wish Ada had known her own mind earlier ! "

This fine effort ended abruptly. Indeed it can hardly be said to have had a real ending. It merely left off, like an Epic, ceasing with a last fervid pen stroke that just escaped by a stormy heave or two from being a straight line and stood (more or less) for " Mary Chepstowe." I put the sheets down, wondering whether this, that sounded so commonplace, so different, now that it had come, from what many wistful dreams had led me to expect, was really the message from heaven I had once pined for, and why, if it was, I did not straight away, on this foundation, proceed to erect a new castle in Spain. It was true that Maria only said " as good as off," but even so, the news should have been enough for twenty castles. The fact was, and I learned it with surprise, that there was so much that was foreign to the past crowding in and claiming attention, that for the moment this wonderful intimation was unable to " bite deep."

I sat on in the verandah with the letter before me. After a while Hanbury and Miss Cavisham came out of the inner room and went down the steps with anxious eyes, whispering softly to one another. Jimmy had, I gathered, insisted on her coming out to take some food, but she would touch nothing but a biscuit, nibbling it as she walked restlessly in the shade by his side. I heard Mr. Cavisham from within complaining drearily, and was aware of his wife's voice soothing him. There were murmurs and counter murmurs, soft sounds of endearment and encouragement. I listened in

a sort of dull amazement. Was it all just to show me how it would be if it ever became *my* turn? I could not think it. I refused to entertain the idea.

The voices from within died away. There was a long silence, and then slowly I woke to the sound of, as it were, two punkahs being pulled in the inner chamber. It was some little time before I realized that the measure of the second punkah was the creak of Mr. Cavisham's laboured breathing. As this knowledge reached me I heard a quick step on the boards, and found Mrs. Cavisham's white changed face close to mine.

"He's almost foaming at the mouth!" she whispered. "He looks awful! What shall we do? Poor darling, what a beast I've been to him! What an unutterable beast! Listen to his breathing. I didn't realize! Where are the others?" In her paroxysm of self-reproach she clutched my shoulder, almost shook me. Her eyes blazed with reproof. "Come in and see him!" she gasped. "You must do something for him! Don't sit out here, doing nothing! Oh, why do you make it so hard for me to do my duty?"

CHAPTER XXIX

PERMANGANATE of potash jumped up several points in popular estimation at Mindaung before another sun had set.

Saya Tu, always to the fore when it came to a matter of asking, was the first to demand a pinch, and I could have disposed of half a pound of the purple stuff before the end of the following day. Whether it was really the permanganate, or Mrs. Cavisham's tending, or just the patient's good luck in having been bitten after Ma Kin, I cannot say; what I can say is that, whereas the snake woman died in considerable agony, curled up on the mat in front of the headman's house, early in the afternoon, Mr. Cavisham, despite alarming symptoms, lived to see his daughter married and to determine, to his own satisfaction, the mean cephalic index of the Tibeto-Burman.

He was even able to grin wanly in response to the civil surgeon's amazed congratulations on the evening following. He was still shaky then, of course, and, if the truth be told, Cotter confided to me a doubt whether the good man's heart would ever be much use for anything again. However, he was well enough to sit up and talk, and to refer intelligently, if somewhat sheepishly, to his accident, and could, I have no doubt, have, if necessary, given evidence

at the inquest on Ma Kin, which Maung Myit (whom the news brought flying on to the scene again) was all for holding as early as possible. I have always wondered whether, if necessity had made it imperative, he would have been able to give a connected account of the circumstances in which the woman was bitten, or whether, as I shrewdly suspect would have been the case, he would have had to plead ignorance on most points. The fact remains that I have never to this day learnt what happened when Ma Kin and Mr. Cavisham were alone together in the jungle and Nagagi escaped for the second and last time.

The invalid only once spoke to me alone on the subject and I observed that the intervening shock seemed to have dulled his memory. "To be sure," he confessed, blinking at my brutal leading question. "To be sure, now that you mention it, I do seem to remember having used the expression 'interesting experiment' to Hanbury, though, to tell you the honest truth, Chepstowe, (he wiped his glasses nervously on the sleeve of his spotless pyjama suit) I should be very sorry to have to describe the experiment now . . . You'll think it funny, but, except for one or two . . ." He looked up rather helplessly at me; he seemed to think it a little unkind of me to wish to catechize him in his feeble state. "I suppose," he admitted reluctantly at last, "that we must call it a case of animal magnetism, though really, that I, of all people . . . I don't like to think of it, Chepstowe, honestly I don't."

And that was all I was able to get out of him, as he lay on a camp cot and let his mind range languidly

over the past. I did not hear him touch upon the matter again till later, and by that time his view was astonishingly dispassionate. It seemed to him then as natural to have succumbed as it would have been to lose consciousness under chloroform. Now that she was gone, he mourned Ma Kin no more than he would have mourned a skilful anaesthetist who had been experimenting on him. I knew there was a portion of what he did remember that he felt bound to withhold, though, with this reservation, he would probably in the end have been ready to say what he did recollect. Twenty-five rupees were found, after her death, tucked away in Ma Kin's pink silk waist-band, and no doubt Mr. Cavisham could have told us how they passed, but I knew that to call upon him to give a formal public account of the accident and of all that led up to it would be as profitless as it was painful, and so, when Maung Myit talked of examining the sick man at the inquest, I put my foot down. "Out of the question!" I said, in a voice that dared him to remind me that I was on leave and not set in authority. "Out of the question. Mr. Cavisham's not fit to be examined. I tell you his heart is in a very weak state. A strain on it would be most dangerous. Hold your inquest if you like, but you'll have to do without his evidence." My magistrate talked of concessions; of bringing the corpse to the bedside, so that the evidence might be recorded in its presence, but I remained obdurate; and anyone looking up the brown paper-covered record of the enquiry of Ma Kin's death, will find there, in place of the

statement of the principal witness, a certificate, signed "Reginald Cotter, Major, I.M.S." to the effect that Mr. Cavisham was incapacitated, by reasons of health, from giving evidence. If the public has lost a picturesque deposition, let the fault be mine.

They gave Ma Kin a notable funeral the morning we left for Padu. Mr. Cavisham had for the last time been lavish, and rupees flowed like water. Added to this, there was so much that could be done on the cheap that funds went far. It was not often that a corpse brought its own orchestra to Mindaung. Pipe and cymbals and drum were all there on the spot, ready for the trip to Nyaungbin. The comic man whom we had already seen—a cousin of the snake woman's—was, I was told, as inimitable at a dirge as at a *double entendre*, and I have no doubt that on this special occasion he surpassed himself. Naturally we were not present at the ceremony, but I had a vision of brown stripped figures capering nimbly among the pinks and greens of the crowd round the slow borne bier as the procession passed near the rest house, and it was impossible not to hear the band squealing away towards the burial ground. Mr. Cavisham certainly heard it. We had hoped to spare him even this infliction, but, as it happened, our cart drivers could not be torn away from the village till the last of the mourners had left for the cemetery, so we had to sit it out in the rest house, waiting for the laggards. Our baggage had already left, before the sun was up. The invalid was being taken down to Padu in the most spacious

and easy running of the carts. Mrs. Cavisham had her cart too, but this time was really going to ride a tremendous amount on the gentle dun that had brought her husband up from the plains. Cotter, a florid man in spectacles, was accompanying us to the point where his path back to the District headquarters diverged from ours. We were all waiting in the verandah, Mr. Cavisham in our midst, in a long arm-chair, clad in a Japanese dressing-gown, rather exercised in his mind because he had been unable to shave.

The invalid's ear caught the mourners' sprightly progress down the jungle path to the burial ground. The faint thump and the distant trill seemed to hang in the warm air, as much of the essence of the tropical morning as the scent of the near *champak* blossoms and the crimson of the hibiscus that flamed by the gate. He shifted his slippered feet on the leg rests.

"They seem cheerful enough," he remarked anxiously. "What is the festive occasion, I wonder."

We looked at each other. It was an understood thing that he was not to be told what the good folk of Mindaung were making merry over. He had a haunting fear, I believe, remembering the trellised arch of welcome, that the village was going to give the visitors something in the shape of a "send off," and he shrank from it. He had no idea who actually was being sped on her way.

"They don't need much of an excuse for a *tamasha*. It may be anything," I observed vaguely. "They've gone, in any case, by now," I went on, as the drum note died away down the valley.

"Why shouldn't they have their little fun, dear?" asked his wife softly, and at her words the strain on his face relaxed.

"And there are our cartmen at last!" remarked Hanbury, with a sigh of relief, as, to the tune of fierce shouts from the back regions, his Burman orderly appeared, driving before him a brace of shamefaced rustics. He stretched himself and sprang to his feet. "Glory be! now we can be off!" he cried.

Mr. Cavisham was helped into the cart, hating to be dependent on our aid, but unable to do without it when it came to the point. Full length upon his mattress he lay and wiped his glasses, taking his farewell look at the thatched rest house with the hillside piled behind it. Hanbury and Miss Cavisham, mounting together, passed through the compound gate ahead of the rest of the party, and were, after the manner of their kind, lost to us for the rest of the forenoon. Cotter set Mrs. Cavisham ceremoniously on the dun. I got into my saddle, and the three of us, riding abreast, followed Mr. Cavisham's cart out of the gate. Maung Myit, with the village headman and such of his satellites as had not followed Ma Kin to her grave, clustered by the fence to bid us farewell and squatted in salutation, pouching their betel ends for the occasion. The headman would have followed us on a thick-necked bay, but I said "No," and he desisted, grateful.

Mrs. Cavisham turned to me as our ponies paced down the deep-rutted track after the cart. "I want you two men to ride on please," she said

"Don't wait for me. I shall creep. I'm going to keep close to my husband all the time."

To this the susceptible Cotter demurred breezily as he adjusted the chin strap over his purple jowl. He gave her of his wisdom to understand that she would be all the better for a canter. He virtually prescribed brisk horse exercise for her, making it as good as a professional matter. His patient (bless you)! was all right, and she looked overdone with much sick-nursing, needed a blow of fresh air. However, she knew her own mind and refused to forsake her charge, even for a moment. "I couldn't bear not to be there if he did want me!" was how she put it, looking severely virginal in her white habit. Cotter blinked behind his gold-rimmed spectacles as we rode obediently on. He figured himself a desperate man of the world. He knew things.

"Most extraordinarily devoted!" he confided to me when we were out of hearing, rubbing his pony's bristling neck with his riding whip. "Nervous, eh? Well, of course I had to frighten her a bit, though there's no reason whatever why the old boy should spend the *whole* of the day in her pocket. Funny! Tell me, when did his first wife die, Chepstowe? Newly married, I take it. Didn't I say so? She looks it. Ah, (he shook his head sagely) wait another year, my lad."

At the Ywathit village fence our ways parted, and the civil surgeon left us and dwindled away into a black dot down a long hot vista of telegraph poles and cactus hedges, after final detailed instructions as to the care of his patient and a gallant

tribute to Mrs. Cavisham's devotion. His testimony was glowing, as well it might be, but the rascal's tongue was in his cheek, I doubt not, and his "wait another year!" meant really "wait another month," or even "week." He favoured me with a ghost of a wink as he waved me farewell, as who should cry "Don Juan! When my back is turned! eh?" and I felt relieved, for if he had guessed a quarter of the truth, I should have got a stony glare instead.

But Cotter's cynicism would have received no encouragement that day. Mrs. Cavisham's attitude towards me and the world in general was what in diplomatic parlance would have been termed studiously correct. To her husband she was pitifully loyal, humouring, cheering and amusing him in turns, and, curiously enough, for once we had a Matthew who was positively a trial, peevish and exacting, who called for no everyday measure of patience. Nothing, however, seemed to put her out. She bore with him through everything. She was an object lesson to us all. I had no idea she had it in her. I was fairly impressed. I felt so safe, too! Had she not been so marvellously transformed I should not have dared to be there.

We slept the night at Ywathit for Mr. Cavisham's sake, and for his sake made slow ground all the following day, stopping at noon at a small wayside bungalow that we had passed over on our outward journey. And here in the evening I had my first talk alone with Mrs. Cavisham. Our halt had stretched out through the day. At the eleventh hour it had been decided to stop the night there

instead of pushing on to Paukbin. This decision threw us back in our settled programme, but we reckoned we could still make Paukbin by midday the next day and Padu by nightfall, in time for the mail steamer for Rangoon which left on the following morning. Hanbury and his beloved as usual dematerialized in the cool of the evening; Mr. Cavisham had, after some fretful argument, been coaxed to sleep, and his wife came out to me as I sat with the English papers in the open space in front of the rest house and watched the sun go down. There was a deal of slate-coloured cloud in the sky; the west was far greyer than of wont, and Mindaung stood as though posed, rather sulkily, for his portrait, all in a grim stormy indigo on our left, forcing himself on one, so to speak, almost more when in the middle distance than when he filled the bulk of the picture. If it had been warm on the slopes above, it was doubly so in the plain below. It positively looked like rain.

"You've got him off?" I enquired with a smile, as I lifted a sheaf of periodicals from the chair into which she was preparing to drop.

She nodded soberly. "I've got him off," she replied. "He's in for a tiring day to-morrow, and I simply insisted on it. If he's very good, I've promised him a magazine when he wakes. Which would he like, do you think? Oh! he's getting on finely. I'm so proud. Tell me about to-morrow, now. We must get into Padu by the evening, mustn't we?"

"Well, it's just this," I said. "If you miss the steamer the following morning, it means four

days' wait for you at Padu till the next boat comes."

She was turning the leaves of a picture paper idly. "Four days," she murmured. "That's a long time. Yes, of course we must get in by to-morrow evening then." She fluttered the pages in silence for a while, then looking up gravely, she asked "What are you going to do?"

"What? when I get to Padu?" I returned. "Oh heavens, I don't know! I may go on to Rangoon. I'm at a loose end. I've got half my leave still to run. I'll make up my mind to-morrow."

"It would be nice if you could go with us to Rangoon," she suggested softly. I said nothing. "Very nice," she went on presently, and then, when I still was silent, she put it to me, scanning me solemnly and benignantly, "What did you come down with us for? Why didn't you stop on at Mindaung?"

I shuffled my feet. "Can you imagine me left alone at Mindaung?" I laughed. "I should be bored to extinction."

"Not you!" she assured me. "I know what you've come for. You've come to help look after Matthew. It was very sweet of you, but you oughtn't to have, you know . . ."

"I should never have dreamt of stopping up there by myself," I protested. "Do you know, I've run out of butter and whisky! I'm living on your charity."

She fell back for a moment on her pictures. "Rangoon," she said, after a while. "And then, I suppose, Calcutta, like us."

"Well, not that I know of," I returned dubiously. "More likely down the coast. If it weren't so beastly hot! You see, my sister's wedding is off for the time being—at least—that is to say . . ." and I hesitated, for Maria had left me without very much to go upon.

She seemed to be eyeing me narrowly. "You heard from her the other day, didn't you?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "The day you got your last mail; the day of the—the smash-up."

"The smash-up!" She seemed to recognize that the expression summed up the facts wonderfully, and at the same time, oddly enough, she gave me a distinct impression of regarding the past as so pulverised by the crash that we were free to erase all the morbid, ill-balanced past from our memories and start afresh. She thought it over in silence for a space. "Did she say anything about the wedding in her letter?" she asked.

"She did," said I, "but she has no plans. She can't be married at home now, and may just possibly be coming out to India before the hot weather. Still, there's practically no chance of her being in Calcutta before my leave is up. No, it wasn't for that I left Mindaung."

She had a moment of frank curiosity. "Well, then, what did you leave it for?" she demanded, just as though no explanation she or I had given so far was to be treated very seriously; and really, when I came to think of it, my motives were so obscure even to my inmost self, that I could only look up into the grey evening sky and shrug, and, letting

my glance fall, meet hers half guiltily. Why, candidly, had I come down, after all that had happened between us, if it had not been to be near her, to watch her, to see how she was going to develop in her new conditions. By rights, of course, after our last fervid colloquy in the verandah over the breakfast table, I ought to have kept away from her, and so I should have done if she had not, by her last transformation, suddenly made it once more safe to be with her. In a way it was outrageous that I should continue to haunt her, and I could think of literally no other plea than that she was still such an extraordinarily enthralling object lesson. That was at the bottom of it, no doubt. How was she going to shape? How long would her present phase last? I had a vague craving to see how it was all going to end, so much so that I was prepared to fly in the face of Providence and propriety and risk being a little longer in her company. It was playing with fire—and then again it was not. After all, it *was* different now!

She settled herself into her long arm-chair. "Won't you tell me?" she asked gently, but, as usual, I had nothing to tell her, and she seemed to be quite content that I should hold off from revelations. It was not long after this that there was a call from the rest house, and she rose from her chair with a soft sigh and went back to her husband, swinging in her hand the magazine she had promised him.

CHAPTER XXX

THERE was heavy rain that night, rain of a vigour that was almost unheard of for the time of year: a thunderous roar on the corrugated iron roof of the rest house all through the night watches. It was still drumming noisily when we awoke, and it did not clear till well into the forenoon. Then the clouds drew away, to cling round the neck of the big hill, and the plain steamed under a clean heaven and a fiery sun; but the road was by then a reeking line of muddy ruts through which the carts laboured squishing; the watercourses all went frothing red; a bridge had been carried away in one place; and in the patches of black cotton soil country we were near being bogged. Everything was against our getting into Padu that night. In point of fact we did not even reach Paukbin—and that after a deal of toilsome wading—till late in the afternoon, and, with Mr. Cavisham worried and overstrained, the idea of trying to catch the morrow's boat at Padu had to be abandoned.

It was an upset for our plans, but there was no help for it. I was a little put out, but no one else seemed to mind. Hanbury and Miss Cavisham bore the set-back with smiling fortitude. It meant

four more days together for them, so why should they complain? For Mr. Cavisham it meant just a little less fatigue for the moment. For Mrs. Cavisham it meant—well, I wondered how Mrs. Cavisham was going to take it. She told me in due course.

I have in an earlier chapter tried to give you an impression of the rest house at Paukbin at hot midday. You must try and picture it now in the limpid evening glow, with Mindaung, a blue vision, delectably cloud-capped after the rain, lifting his head in the east, not on any account to be overlooked. You must figure Mr. Cavisham safe under his mosquito nets behind matting walls, the young people taking cover, heaven knows where, in some corner of the rose-tinged landscape, and Mrs. Cavisham and myself "eating the air" in the neighbourhood of the rest house.

There was a teak monastery between it and the village, all the colour of a dark cigar. Stiff funereal cactus surrounded its well swept white enclosure. Its dark gabled roof shut out an oblong patch of the pink evening. Up into the air beside it towered a mighty ceremonial pole with a carved bird monster black atop and a tattered streamer dangling from it against the sky. We had exchanged a few words with the bald, beetle-browed monk who dawdled, swinging a loose end of his saffron robe, under a dark jack fruit tree close to the brick-work approach. We had thumped with deers' horns on the big bell that hung by the steps, and had compared its throbbing note with the bang of the great drum that had

been struck inside the building. And now, from the lime-washed parapet of the adjoining pagoda, we were looking out together over the darkening plain, every whit as companionable, strangely enough, as though our time on Mindaung, with all its heart-burnings, had never been. So much the change that had come over her had wrought. A sombre continuous stretch of tree growth in the distance told of the river. It was quite easy to find Padu where the line grew blue, a matter of eight miles away. I pointed it out to her.

"It's not so far, is it?" I said. "If your dear man were fitter, we might get there in time to-morrow even yet."

"Don't talk of it," she returned. "I'm not going to have my dear man rushed. There's no reason, though," she went on, "why you should not ride in to-morrow morning early if you want to. Why don't you? Why wait for us? You've got to get to Rangoon."

"I've every bit as much time as you have," I argued, with a determination not to be "rushed" myself. "Why should I mind four days in Padu?"

She had her elbows planted on the brick-work of the parapet and her chin nestling provokingly on her palm. "Four days of us there, remember!" she said, with a side glance over her hands.

"Well," I returned banteringly, "I suppose I shall be able to survive even four days of *you* there. I've managed very well so far, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have," she admitted with her light laugh, and waited as though for more from me. I

tugged for a while at a loose brick, and a moment later she went on, still in the same light vein. "You've stood us wonderfully," she cried. "Quite wonderfully! I can't think how it is you're not dead sick of us by now."

I found myself looking at her in turn over my hands. "Why should I be sick of you?" I demanded, "Come, now. Nobody can say you're not interesting."

"Interesting!" she echoed. "Well, I suppose we are *that* at any rate, with our quips and our cranks, even if we're nothing else." She mused, appearing to turn it over. "Yes," she continued, reflectively, "we're at least interesting. I think—do you know?—that I really begin to see why you have come down with us."

"You see more than I do, then," I rejoined.

Suffused with the western glow, she scanned my face with calm benevolence. She leant to pick a piece of plaster off my sleeve. She held the scrap between her fingers and seemed, as she spoke, to be talking to it. "I do know," was the murmur that came. "You want to see if I am going to keep it up."

"Keep it up?" I said. "Keep what up?"

She went on confiding to her finger tips. "Keep on being a pattern wife," she said. "Keep on devoting myself to Matthew, turning over a new leaf."

She had probed me to some purpose! I tried to utter a vague disclaimer, but words failed me utterly, and she rushed in to help me, as though half afraid I should turn and rend her. "Oh, but I'm going

to keep it up!" she assured me, earnestly. "I want you to see that I can. Why shouldn't you see? Don't think I mind. I particularly want you to see."

"Why?" I asked, like a fool, and for a moment all the answer I got was a look that made me wonder whether she had not, after all, chosen this moment of all others to leave off "keeping it up." The last red of the evening caught her face. When she spoke her voice seemed to come out of a rosy mist.

"You're a strange creature!" she said, "a very strange creature! For whose sake do you imagine I have kept it up so long?"

I had a sudden quick shock. There was something in her voice that recalled all my old terror. To think that a few hours before I had looked upon her as so changed as to be once more "safe!" There came, as usual, my quick revulsion; a wriggle to escape.

"Why, for your husband's, I trust," I growled. She replied, "Not for him."

I felt the toils closing round me and made another effort to get clear of them. "Well, all I can say is that it ought to have been!" I returned.

I saw her colour come. It was not the sunset, I swear. Her eyes were riveted on me, her accusing eyes, and I felt them see through my clap-trap. "That's not what you think," she said. "Not after what I've told you. Don't pretend it is. You know it's for your sake, and in your heart you're glad. I'm going to learn to be a better wife for your sake."

She moved nearer to me as she spoke. I began to see. I ought to have seen before. It was alarming still, of course, but my first thought was that it was not nearly so alarming as it should by rights have been. I saw it was possible to treat this revelation lightly, as though I had missed all its true inwardness. "For your sake" might mean anything.

"Well, anyway, long may you be a good wife to him!" I laughed awkwardly.

She echoed in a sombre tone "Long!"

I tried hard to keep the touch light. "Oh, come," I said, with forced cheerfulness, "why shouldn't it be long?" and all the time I felt her pitying glance upon me.

She gave me a good look before she replied; then she gazed away into the sunset. "Don't think I'm not going to make it as long as I can," I heard her say. "But you know that doctor man told me exactly what he told you about the poor old dear. It might be any moment, he said; any moment. It will always be touch and go. Oh, I'm going to try to make amends for the past, but at best the time must be short, and then—and then——"

There was a silence that might be felt after this, a silence that was pervaded by a strange vision. She and I seemed to be facing each other across something that lay with folded hands, white and still, and had old Matthew's puzzled face. For a moment I had all the sensations of murder except the excitement. She turned and buried her face in her hands, resting her elbows on the parapet. Presently some one in the monastery behind us started on the big bell again. Its tone reverberated

through the evening air, once, twice, a third time. For fully half a minute the pure tone lingered, with infinite tenderness, grew fainter and fainter, and then passed, as though the night had sucked its sweetness into itself. The red in the western sky faded. In the rest house below us a new light shone clear-cut, yellow. Daniel had lit the evening lamp and was bearing it ceremonially across the open verandah.

"And then—" her voice came gently at last from between her fingers. "And then you will remember that I was able to keep it up."

The next thing I seem to recall was our turning together and seeking the level. The monastery roof, the pagoda spire, the looming pole with its drooping streamer were all dark above us. Only the masonry parapet and the steps we had just come down shone white in the gloom. At the foot of the descent she said, "If you don't understand now, you will before our four days are up. I'm glad we've been delayed like this. It will give me time to show you things."

And, looking into my own heart, I was scandalized to find that, having got over my first fright, I felt rather glad myself. It was a relief to find that nothing was going to happen just then. We were going to wait. Everything decisive seemed by mutual consent to have been relegated to a distant future. The present had been put on a bizarre but more or less reputable footing, and we had just to wait for things to unfold themselves while she "kept it up" and showed me things. And, after all, if her husband's heart were really so horribly weak—

I made the discovery that I was all in a tingle. It would be an experience, at any rate. I should have lived four days, whatever happened, when the time was up. Looking back, it seemed to me in the semi-darkness of the mat shed where I went to change for dinner, that, strictly speaking, I could hardly be said to have realized what living was till I met Mrs. Cavisham.

CHAPTER XXXI

A THIN wisp of moon looked down upon us out of the western sky as we walked back to the rest house, but it soon disappeared.

It was at Paukbin as at Mindaung, there was no room for Hanbury and me in the rest house. Our tent filled a cart that was still toiling after us, delayed by the rain-sodden ruts, so our camp cots had been put for the night into an open shed by the stables, partitioned off into two cubicles by gaudy cotton hangings that we had borrowed from the village. We had both in our time been housed far worse while scouring the jungles. It was late by the time we began turning in by the light of a couple of hurricane lanterns. I dismissed Daniel, whom I found squatting, half asleep, beside my kit bag on the floor, and, sitting down on my camp bed, I pulled off my boots and turned matters over.

I was a fool, and I knew it ! Whatever had I said to the woman and allowed her to say to me ? How the deuce had it all come about ? Everything had been well, I remembered, till after dinner, till after Mr. Cavisham had been got to sleep, till Mrs. Cavi-sham had slipped out, rustling whitely, a little worn, into the verandah, to find the young couple with their presence just hinted at by the restless red end of

Hanbury's cheroot somewhere in the gloom of the compound, and me leaning moodily on the verandah rail. She had come softly to my side without a word. I had felt her coming—to test our new relation! Then, for the next hour, my cigar had, in its turn, marked our progress up and down the road outside, no one heeding.

She had been full, at first, of her husband's state. He was distinctly better. He had eaten and slept like an angel and expected another lovely night. She had rung the changes on this happy theme with nervous persistence. She had laid it upon me that we were both to be so glad, so very glad, that he was getting on so well. She really thought Cotter a bit of an alarmist. And then, all of a sudden, when we felt at our safest, some incautious word was uttered, and we found ourselves in dangerous waters—and stopped there. Heaven knows! I can look back and say honestly that I did struggle, as I had struggled in the past—but it was no good. She bore me down. I had made the most of my fit of revulsion while it lasted. I had tried to remember her as she was, hot and plaintive and unattractive in the morning glare, but in vain. The pendulum had swung back, and, with the familiar starlit associations, my old feelings had surged in upon me with tenfold strength. What had I said to her? Strangely little that I could remember now. I had mumbled some weak deprecation, but anything vital that I had contributed had been in my silences.

And what had I let her say to me? When her phrases came up again in my mind, I could only call myself an invertebrate ass. An invertebrate

ass I had been, and very soon I found I had to call myself a defiant ass, for, as the moments went by, I began asking myself why I should not have allowed her to speak out her mind. Confound it! I was free, and she was free too! It was our business and ours only if we chose, while looking ahead, to make the present as gloriously full as possible. If I had been an ass, it was because it suited me, even in this my day of maturity, to kick up my heels a little. And, after all, it was force of circumstance that had driven me to asinine gambols. I had done my best, but what is the good of your best when the fates have willed it for your worst, have put you here and left you there, and given you this, that and the other sense and instinct and opportunity to that appointed end! "Better drift with the tide," I said. "Better drift."

I tugged reflectively at my bootlaces and recalled her last few sentences, still fresh in my mind. "We shall have those four days at Padu, you know. We can have that good time together after all . . . And why not more days afterwards, going down the river? . . . What's the good of taking leave if you're not going to have a good time? . . . ' However had we managed to get so far? The mischief had all begun by her reminding me of some half hysterical undertaking I had stuttered at that disordered moment in the jungle when Daniel panted up with news of the catastrophe. It strikes me now as grossly unfair that she should have held me to that irresponsible outcry, but at the time it seemed natural enough. It had led up to all the rest. It was the beginning of the end. What the finish of

the end was to be I neither knew, nor, at the moment, cared. The flood had hold of me. I was on the drift.

I sat with my bare feet on the bed before me, watching a mosquito hovering round my ankles, selecting a point to settle on. The damp seemed to have brought the insects out in their battalions. Hanbury on the further side of the cotton *kalaga* was troubled horribly by the mosquitoes too. He was moving about on his bed, slapping himself. He appeared to be in no hurry to get to sleep.

And now, in addition to the creaking of the wooden cot, I was aware of footsteps outside, a hesitating tread, and a faint flare of fresh lamplight mingled with the yellow beams of my hurricane lantern. I heard Hanbury pull up short in the middle of a yawn and mutter an enquiry. A voice came back, and Hanbury spoke again. A word or two of Burmese was exchanged. I lifted up a corner of the party-hanging to see what the newcomer wanted. "A telegram?" asked Hanbury in the vernacular, as though he had only just succeeded in grasping things, and below the checked cloth I saw a figure in khaki, with lantern clutched, holding out a reddish object. "Oh, curse it! not a violent crime report?" I heard my companion wail. "I'm not going out to-night; not if it's ten dacoities! Why can't they let one sleep in peace?" Next moment he had glanced closer at the paper towards which the figure held the light and, giving a grunt of relief, passed it on to me. "Chepstowe," he read. "The Lord be praised! They can't pull you out of bed, anyway."

I took the envelope. It was indeed a telegram, and for me. "Where do you come from?" I asked the messenger, who, I saw, was a police constable. He said from Padu. I waved the message in his face. "When did this arrive?" I enquired. He told me, at sunset that same day. The subdivisional officer had despatched him with it immediately it came. The young man had expected to have to canter all the way to Mindaung with it, and was grinningly elate at having got off with an eight mile ride only.

I made him hold the lantern close up, while I read the following :

*"Old plans stand. Am arriving Calcutta 19th.
Expect to you see there. Wedding 26th."*

That was all. Maria had not thought it necessary to append her name. The "wedding" explained everything. The message had been sent from Bombay. It was clear that things had been busy happening at home since my sister's last belated letter had been written. Somewhere in Padu there was probably another letter waiting for me to tell what the developments were, though of course it was quite on the cards that I should find none when I got there. The chances were that the dear creature had forgotten all about writing, and had made up for it with the telegram at the eleventh hour. The message showed that, as Claude had failed to get his leave, Maria had finally made up her mind to hurry out and have the knot tied before it grew too horridly hot for anything ; and here she was, already in Bombay.

I nibbled, pondering, at the corner of the paper. I was quite pleased to think that I should have plenty of time to see the old lady before my leave was up.

"Not recalling you from leave, I suppose," said Hanbury, kicking off his slippers.

"Bless you, no," I said, brought back to myself by the sound of his voice. "I shall probably be making a bid for an extension." I turned the telegram over in my hand. It seemed to have been sent to show me that I had all along been destined to travel over from Rangoon to Calcutta in the same steamer as the Cavishams. It was the finger of . . . well, it was a finger, anyway, . . . pointing.

Hanbury broke in again upon my meditations. "You've got three months due if you want to take them, haven't you," said he. "Not bad news, I hope."

"Not in the least," I assured him. "It's just to say that my sister is coming out to be married after all. I shall be going to Calcutta for the wedding."

"Ah!" he murmured, and I knew that he was calculating, just as I was, that I should be crossing the Bay of Bengal with the occupants of the rest house. He had followed me up towards my bed, but now he prepared to retire into his own quarters again. "Bridesmaid coming out too?" he asked, sportively, raising the hangings that shrouded him from the world.

I gave a jump. "Bridesmaid?" I said. "No."

He murmured "Good night," in a soothing voice, and disappeared.

"No, of course not!" I said to myself the moment

I was alone again. "Why the deuce should she?"

With the words on my lips, my heart stood still, and a moment later I was on my knees on the shaky bamboo flooring studying the message again by the light of my own lantern which stood at the head of my cot. Had Maria said "am" arriving, or could the word, by any extraordinary chance, have happened to be "are"? I peered close. I seemed suddenly lifted several feet up to a higher level. Unless my eyes deceived me shockingly, it could positively be read "are." In attempting to think it out I almost bit my finger to the bone. If it was "are," it surely meant . . . At any rate it could not mean that Claude was arriving with Maria . . . And if not Claude . . . ! The paper dropped from my hand, but I soon had it again and was studying it.

"Old plans stand." I read. Ada had certainly formed a part of the old plans, the most important for me. But then she had got engaged to Thomas Archer, and, so far as I knew, was engaged still. However could she be coming out with Maria? Of course it was only "so far as I knew . . ." I tried to recollect the wording of my sister's letter. "As good as broken off," it had said, of course. Only "as good as." What warrant had I for supposing that it really was off, and that it was this incident that had brought about the change of programme? And yet—"are coming!" for, looking at it again, it most distinctly was "are." Heavens, if she should be with my sister! How it altered things for me! How the prepossessions of the moment dwindled into nothingness before this great, this

superb possibility! When could I find out for certain? It was the 15th now. Even if I travelled by the later boat from Padu, I could be in Calcutta before the 26th. The earlier boat might get me in before then, but somehow I had got accustomed within the last few hours to thinking of the later boat. It had meant crossing with the Cavishams.

With the Cavishams!

I instantly went cold, and it was surely the suddenness and violence of the shock that gave me the measure of the depth to which I had all but fallen. With the Cavishams—to meet *her*! It was like cold water down my spine. It made me see things. I saw canvas awnings, blue sea, two figures stretched side by side in long arm-chairs on a well-scoured teak deck, bound for Calcutta. I looked further into the future. I saw old Cavisham a confirmed invalid, failing slowly, fading away, bed-ridden; and his wife, sprightly and unconcerned—for ever, as I had uncouthly phrased it, “out in the verandah with the other beggar.” And that philandering other beggar, who waited, smirking there with his indecent cold-bloodedness, to step into a dead man’s shoes, was always—myself! It made me almost sick.

What the devil had I meant to do just now? To tell the truth, I hardly knew. It was not all so vague, however, as to hinder the rising within me of a chill sensation of fear, like the feeling that clutched me first when Daniel, by the godown steps, handed me a blue-grey note on a copy-book, or perhaps more like what I went through when the pestilent Nagagyi just missed my wrist on the verandah of Ma Kin’s house. I had been in mortal

peril ; nay was in it still. It was not too late, even now, to escape, provided I could take swift resolute action—but for the moment I was paralyzed. I fear I have said unkind things about Mr. Cavisham from time to time, but, upon my word, I doubt whether he was ever as ineffectual as I, who for a full half-hour could only stand in the insect-ridden lantern flicker, and sweat, and ponder, and resolve, and break each fresh resolution. Let me say that I can claim no credit for the upshot. I had told myself that I was content to drift, and I believe that what settled me in the end was the feeling that, in a way, I should be trusting myself most to the stream if I followed the pointing finger of the telegram which seemed to have dropped from the sky above into my indecisive hand. I had a shamed sense that the current was carrying me where it listed, and that the last eddy had chosen to bring me, in the extremity of my terror, into the neighbourhood of a small erect demure figure that stood and faced me from across the swirling torrent with fluttering eyelids ; a little reproachful ; a little unhappy at my backslidings, but quite ready, if I broke resolutely with the past, to let the broken pieces lie, and give me her hand and lift me out of the flood. Very faintly she shone—for, after all, how was I to be sure that I should see her in Calcutta ?—still, as the event showed, not so faintly but that she was able, for all her ethereal dimness, to draw me from the tide and set me on my feet again.

CHAPTER XXXII

IT was past midnight and Hanbury had been snoring for some time when I made my final resolve and ordered my goings. I heard him heave noisily on his camp bed as I called his name.

"Eh? What is it?" he grunted out of the darkness.

"Hanbury," I said. "If I'm not here when you get up to-morrow——"

"Not here!" he interrupted.

"Yes," said I. "Not here; gone. If I'm not here, you'll know I've gone off to catch to-morrow's down steamer at Padu."

"To-morrow! The devil!" he muttered. I heard nothing more for a quarter of a minute, and thought he had dropped off again. Then there came another heave. "What? for the wedding?" said a drowsy voice.

"Yes, for the wedding," I replied.

There was a pause, and then "That's very sudden," he growled.

"That telegram was very sudden," I rejoined. "I've had to alter all my plans."

He was far too sleepy to argue the matter effectively out. "Make it so," he yawned. "You'll

have to get up beastly early. Why don't you go by the later boat?"

"Too late," I said. "Look here, will you make my apologies to the Cavishams?"

"Eh, what? Won't you be going with them then?" he enquired.

"No," I replied. "Of course I shan't be going with them."

"No use their trying to catch the earlier boat, I suppose?" he muttered.

"Not the least," I said firmly. "They can't possibly do it. Will you say good-bye to them from me?"

"Oh, rather," he promised, making his cot creak again.

I stood silent a moment by my own bed. "There's the telegram to show them," I went on. "It will explain matters. Catch!" I folded the message and tossed it over the partition. "Have you got it?" I asked.

"No," he returned, "but I heard where it fell. It's lodged on the top of the mosquito curtain. I'll find it in the morning. Yes, I'll explain matters to the Cavishams. You'll think better of it tomorrow, though, I expect. Good night."

"Good night," I said.

And when he had fairly started trumpeting again, I crept out like a thief in the night, with the mosquitoes buzzing round my bare ankles, and went and woke Daniel.

CHAPTER XXXIII

DAWN was breaking when I staggered stiffly into the rest house compound. The cart with my baggage and bedding had squealed away into the blackness two hours earlier and I had spent the interval dozing in a long arm-chair of Hanbury's, listening to the shrill cry of herald cocks and waiting for the grey of the morning. Not till the last moment did I venture to put on my boots. I was in a panic lest Hanbury should hear me, and wake and want to chatter and argue.

There had been a time, an hour back, when, lying in the dark, in the border-land between dream and vigil, with my socks on the leg rests, I had thought of leaving some kind of message behind. It seemed altogether unpardonable that I should sneak away under cover of the night like this without a word to my companions; and yet, when it came to the point, what could I do? I might have written, of course, but I ought to have thought of it before. How was I to lay hands on pen and paper now without rousing some one? It was too late. I could write from Padu. At the moment I positively dared do nothing!

I felt ineffably mean, the meanest thing in Upper Burma, as I slunk out into the open. Not a soul

was stirring, except by the low thatched stable, where a silent syce, with his head and shoulders muffled in a white cloth, stood ghost-like, tightening the girths of my chestnut. The hushed quiet and the dimness gave me heart. The gloom would hide my going mercifully; if, indeed, anything so paltry and inappreciable as myself needed hiding!

I skulked like a prowling jackal across the sandy stretch where the dewy grass grew in patches. My pony whinnied at my approach, looking for sugar cane or lump of jaggery, and I lifted a reproving riding switch to silence him. The syce held my stirrup and salaamed wordlessly as I made for the gate. The moist earth was noiseless under the unshod hoofs.

At the top of a rise fifty yards from the bungalow, I slewed round and turned for a final look back, before breaking into a trot, half wondering, in an absurd inconsequent way, whether I might not perhaps get a fleeting glance of a figure in a lilac dressing-gown in the verandah where once I had sat and breakfasted with a vision all in white on crimson cushions, with hair mysteriously bunched. But of course the verandah was empty. The rest house lay black and silent in the hush of the dawn, the plain stretched ashen beyond it, and there, above rest house and plain, great Mindaung stood up for the last time, stark and grey, against a primrose edge of morning.

I turned again in my saddle and set my face to the river and to whatever it might be that lay, on the knees of the gods, beyond it.